CHAPTER 1

Zhen Shi-yin makes the Stone's
acquaintance in a dream
And Jia Yu-cun finds that poverty is not incompatible
with romantic feeling

GENTLE READER,

What, you may ask, was the origin of this book?

Though the answer to this question may at first seem to border on the absurd, reflection will show that there is a good deal more in it than meets the eye.

Long ago, when the goddess Nǚ-wa was repairing the sky, she melted down a great quantity of rock and, on the Incredible Crags of the Great Fable Mountains, moulded the amalgam into thirty-six thousand, five hundred and one large building blocks, each measuring seventy-two feet by a hundred and forty-four feet square. She used thirty-six thousand five hundred of these blocks in the course of her building operations, leaving a single odd block unused, which lay, all on its own, at the foot of **Green**sickness Peak in the aforementioned mountains.

Now this block of stone, having undergone the melting and moulding of a goddess, possessed magic powers. It could move about at will and could grow or shrink to any size it wanted Observing that all the other blocks had been used for celestial repairs and that it was the only one to have been rejected as unworthy, it became filled with shame and resentment and passed its days in sorrow and lamentation.

One day, in the midst of its lamentings, it saw a monk and a Taoist approaching from a great distance, each of them remarkable for certain eccentricities of manner and appearance. When they arrived at the foot of **Green**sickness Peak, they sat down on the ground and began to talk. The monk, catching sight of a lustrous, translucent stone—it was in fact the rejected building block which had now shrunk itself to the size of a fan-pendant and looked very attractive in its new shape—took it up on the palm of his hand and addressed it with a smile:

'Ha, I see you have magical properties! But nothing to recommend you. I shall have to cut a few words on you so that anyone seeing you will know at once that you are something special. After that I shall take you to a certain

brilliant
successful
poetical
cultivated
aristocratic
elegant
delectable
luxurious
opulent
locality on a little trip.'

The stone was delighted.

'What words will you cut? Where is this place you will take me to? I beg to be enlightened.'

'Do not ask,' replied the monk with a laugh. 'You will know soon enough when the time comes.'

And with that he slipped the stone into his sleeve and set off at a great pace with the Taoist. But where they both went to I have no idea.

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Countless aeons went by and a certain Taoist called Vanitas in quest of the secret of immortality chanced to be passing below that same **Green**sickness Peak in the Incredible Crags of the Great Fable Mountains when he caught sight of a large stone standing there, on which the characters of a long inscription were clearly discernible.

Vanitas read the inscription through from beginning to end and learned that this was a once lifeless stone block which had been found unworthy to repair the sky, but which had magically transformed its shape and been taken down by the Buddhist mahasattva Impervioso and the Taoist illuminate Mysterioso into the world of mortals, where it had lived out the life of a man before finally attaining nirvana and returning to the other shore. The inscription named the country where it had been born, and went into considerable detail about its domestic life, youthful amours, and even the verses, mottoes and riddles it had written. All it lacked was the authentication of a dynasty and date. On the back of the stone was inscribed the following quatrain:

Found unfit to repair the azure sky
Long years a foolish mortal man was I.
My life in both worlds on this stone is writ:
Pray who will copy out and publish it?

From his reading of the inscription Vanitas realized that this was a stone of some consequence. Accordingly he addressed himself to it in the following manner:

‘Brother Stone, according to what you yourself seem to imply in these verses, this story of yours contains matter of sufficient interest to merit publication and has been carved here with that end in view. But as far as I can see (a) it has no discoverable dynastic period, and (b) it contains no examples of moral grandeur among its characters—no statesmanship, no social message of any kind. All I can find in it, in fact, are a number of females, conspicuous, if at all, only for their passion or folly or for some trifling talent or insignificant virtue. Even if I were to copy all this out, I cannot see that it would make a very remarkable book.’

‘Come, your reverence,' said the stone (for Vanitas had been correct in assuming that it could speak) ‘must you be so obtuse? All the romances ever Written have an artificial period setting—Han or Tang for the most part. In refusing to make use of that stale old convention and telling my *Story of the Stone* exactly as it occurred, it seems to me that, far from *depriving* it of anything, I have given it a freshness these other books do not have.

‘Your so-called “historical romances”, consisting, as they do, of scandalous anecdotes about statesmen and emperors of bygone days and scabrous attacks on the reputations of long-dead gentlewomen, contain more wickedness and immorality than I care to mention. Still worse is the “erotic novel”, by whose filthy obscenities our young folk are all too easily corrupted. And the “boudoir romances”, those dreary stereotypes with their volume after volume all pitched on the same note and their different characters undistinguishable except by name (all those ideally beautiful young ladies and ideally eligible young bachelors)— even they seem unable to avoid descending sooner or later into indecency.

“The trouble with this last kind of romance is that it only gets written in the first place because the author requires a framework in which to show off his love-poems. He goes about constructing this framework quite mechanically, beginning with the names of his pair of young lovers and invariably adding a third character, a servant or the like, to make mischief between them, like the *chou* in a comedy.

‘Wat makes these romances even more detestable is the stilted, bombastic language— inanities dressed in pompous rhetoric, remote alike from nature and common sense and teeming with the grossest absurdities.

‘Surely my "number of females", whom I spent half a lifetime studying with my own eyes and ears, are preferable to this kind of stuff? I do not claim that they are better people than the ones who appear in books written before my time; I am only saying that the contemplation of their actions and motives may prove a more effective antidote to boredom and melancholy. And even the inelegant verses with which my story is interlarded

could serve to entertain and amuse on those convivial occasions when rhymes and riddles are in demand.

'All that my story narrates, the meetings and partings, the joys and sorrows, the ups and downs of fortune, are recorded exactly as they happened. I have not dared to add the tiniest bit of touching-up, for fear of losing the true picture.

'My only wish is that men in the world below may sometimes pick up this tale when they are recovering from sleep or drunkenness, or when they wish to escape from business worries or a fit of the dumps, and in doing so find not only mental refreshment but even perhaps, if they will heed its lesson and abandon their vain and frivolous pursuits, some small arrest in the deterioration of their vital forces. What does your reverence say to that?'

For a long time Vanitas stood lost in thought, pondering this speech. He then subjected the *Story of the stone* to a careful second reading. He could see that its main theme was love; that it consisted quite simply of a true record of real events; and that it was entirely free from any tendency to deprave and corrupt. He therefore copied it all out from beginning to end and took it back with him to look for a publisher.

As a consequence of all this, Vanitas, starting off in the Void (which is Truth) came to the contemplation of Form (which is Illusion); and from Form engendered Passion; and by communicating Passion, entered again Into Form; and from Form awoke to the Void (which is Truth). He therefore changed his name from Vanitas to Brother Amor, or the Passionate Monk, (because he had approached Truth by way of Passion), and changed the title of the book from *The Story of the S tone* to *The Tale of Brother Amor*.

Old Kong Mei-xi from the homeland of Confucius called the book *A Mirror for the Romantic*. Wu Yu-feng called it *A Dream of Golden Days*. Cao Xueqin in his Nostalgia Studio worked on it for ten years, in the course of which he rewrote it no less than five times, dividing it into chapters, composing chapter headings, renaming it *The Twelve Beauties of Jinling,* and adding an introductory quatrain. **Red** Inkstone restored the original title when he recopied the book and added his second set of annotations to it.

This, then, is a true account of how *The Story of the Stone* carne to be written.

Pages full of idle word
Penned with hot and bitter tears:
All men call the author fool;
None his secret message hears.

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The origin of *The Story of the Stone* has now been made clear. The same cannot, however, be said of the characters and events which it recorded. Gentle reader, have patience! This is how the inscription began:

Long, long ago the World was tilted downwards towards the south-east; and in that lower-lying south-easterly part of the earth there is a city called Soochow; and in Soochow the district around the Chang-men Gate is reckoned one of the two or three wealthiest and most fashionable quarters in the world of men. Outside the Chang-men Gate is a wide thorough-fare called Worldly Way; and somewhere off Worldly Way is an area called Carnal Lane. There is an old temple in the Carnal Lane area which, because of the way it is bottled up inside a narrow *Cul-de-Sac*, is referred to locally as Bottle-gourd Temple Next door to Bottle-gourd Temple lived a gentleman of private means called Zhen Shi-yin and his wife Feng-shi, a kind, good woman with a profound sense of decency and decorum. The household was not a particularly wealthy one, but they were nevertheless looked up to by all and sundry as the leading family in the neighbourhood.

Zhen Shi-yin himself was by nature a quiet and totality unambitious person. He devoted his time to his garden and to the pleasures of wine and poetry. Except for a single flaw, his existence could, indeed, have been described as an idyllic one. The flaw was that, although already past fifty, he had no son, only a little girl, just two years old, whose name was Ying-lian.

Once, during the tedium of a burning summer's day, Shi-yin was sitting idly in his study. The book had

slipped from his nerveless grasp and his head had nodded down Onto the desk in a doze. While in this drowsy state he seemed to drift off to some place he could not identify, where he became aware of a monk and a Taoist walking along and talking as they went.

‘Where do you intend to take that thing you are carrying?’ the Taoist was asking.

‘Don't you worry about him!’ replied the monk with a laugh. ‘There is a batch of lovesick souls awaiting incarnation in the world below whose fate is due to be decided this very day. I intend to take advantage of this opportunity to slip our little friend in amongst them and let him have a taste of human life along with the rest.’

‘Well, well, so another lot of these amorous wretches is about to enter the vale of tears,’ said the Taoist.’ How did all this begin? And where are the souls to be reborn?’

‘You will laugh when I tell you,’ said the monk. 'when this 8tone was left unused by the goddess, he found himself at a loose end and took to wandering about all over the place for want of better to do, until one day his wanderings took him to the place where the fairy Disenchantment lives.

‘Now Disenchantment could tell that there was something unusual about this stone, so she kept him there in her Sunset Glow Palace and gave him the honorary title of Divine Luminescent Stone-in-Waiting in the Court of Sunset Glow.

‘But most of his time he spent west of Sunset Glow exploring the banks of the Magic River. There, by the Rock of Rebirth, he found the beautiful **Crimson** Pearl Flower, for which he conceived such a fancy that he took to watering her every day with sweet dew, thereby conferring on her the gift of life.

‘**Crimson** Pearl's substance was composed of the purest cosmic essences, so she was already half-divine; and now, thanks to the vitalizing effect of the sweet dew, she was able to shed her vegetable shape and assume the form of a girl.

‘This fairy girl wandered about outside the Realm of Separation, eating the Secret Passion Fruit when she was hungry and drinking from the Pool of Sadness when she was thirsty. The consciousness that she owed the stone something for his kindness in watering her began to prey on her mind and ended by becoming an obsession.

‘ “I have no sweet dew here that I can repay him with,” she would say to herself “The only way in which I could perhaps repay him would be with the tears shed during the whole of a mortal lifetime if he and I were ever to be reborn as humans in the world below.”

‘Because of this strange affair, Disenchantment has got together a group of amorous young souls, of which **Crimson** Pearl is one, and intends to send them down into the world to take part in the great illusion of human life. And as today happens to be the day on which this stone is fated to go into the world too, I am taking him with me to Disenchantment's tribunal for the purpose of getting him registered and sent down to earth with the rest of these romantic creatures.’

'How very amusing 1' said the Taoist. 'I have certainly never heard of a debt of teats before. why shouldn't the two of us take advantage of this opportunity to go down into the world ourselves and save a few souls? It would be a work of merit.'

'That is exactly what I was thinking,' said the monk. 'Come with me to Disenchantment's palace to get this absurd creature cleared. Then, when this last batch of romantic idiots goes down, you and I can go down with them. At present about half have already been born. They await this last batch to make up the number.'

'Very good, I will go with you then,' said the Taoist Shi-yin heard all this conversation quite clearly, and curiosity impelled him to go forward and greet the two reverend gentle-men. They returned his greeting and asked him what he wanted.

'It is not often that one has the opportunity of listening to a discussion of the operations of *karma* such as the one I have just been privileged to overhear,' said Shi-yin. 'Unfortunately I am a man of very limited understanding and have not been able to derive the full benefit from your conversation. If you would have the very great kindness to enlighten my benighted understanding with a somewhat fuller account of what you were discussing, I can promise you the most devout attention. I feel sure that your teaching would have a salutary

effect on me and—who knows—might save me from the pains of hell.'

The reverend gentlemen laughed. 'These are heavenly mysteries and may not be divulged. But if you wish to escape from the fiery pit, you have only to remember us when the time comes) and all will be well.'

Shi-yin saw that it would be useless to press them. 'Heavenly mysteries must not, of course, be revealed. But might one perhaps inquire what the "absurd creature" is that you were talking about? Is it possible that I might be allowed to see it?'

'Oh, as for that,' said the monk: 'I think it is on the cards for you to have a look at *him,'* and he took the object from his sleeve and handed it to Shi-yin.

Shi-yin took the object from him and saw that it was a clear, beautiful jade on one side of which were carved the words 'Magic Jade'. There were several columns of smaller characters on the back, which Shi-yin was lust going to examine more closely when the monk, with a cry of 'Here we are, at the frontier of Illusion', snatched the stone from him and disappeared, with the Taoist, through a big stone archway above which

THE LAND OF ILLUSION

was written in large characters. A couplet in smaller characters was inscribed vertically on either side of the arch:

Truth becomes fiction when the fiction's true;
Real becomes not-teal where the unreal's real.

Shi-yin was on the point of following them through the archway when suddenly a great clap of thunder seemed to shake the earth to its very foundations, making him cry out in alarm.

And there he was sitting in his study, the contents of his dream already half forgotten, with the sun still blazing on the ever-rustling plantains outside, and the wet-nurse at the door with his little daughter Ying-lian in her arms. Her delicate little **pink**-and-white face seemed dearer to him than ever at that moment, and he stretched out his arms to take her and hugged her to him.

After playing with her for a while at his desk, he carried her out to the front of the house to watch the bustle in the street. He was about to go in again when he saw a monk and a Taoist approaching, the monk scabby-headed and barefoot) the Taoist tousle-haired and limping. They were behaving like madmen, shouting with laughter and gesticulating wildly as they walked along.

When this strange pair reached Shi-yin's door and saw him standing there holding Ying-lian, the monk burst into loud sobs. 'Patron,' he said, addressing Shi-yin, 'what are you doing, holding in your arms that ill-fated creature who is destined to involve both her parents in her own misfortune?'

Shi-yin realized that he was listening to the words of a madman and took no notice. But the monk persisted;

'Give her to me! Give her to me!'

Shi-yin was beginning to lose patience and clasping his little girl tightly to him, turned an his heel and was about to re-enter the house when tine monk printed his finger at him roared with laughter and then proceeded to intone the following verse:

'Fond man, your pampered child to cherish so—
That caltrop-glass which shines on melting snow!
Beware the high feast of the fifteenth day,
When all in smoke and fire shall pass away!'"[1]

Shi-yin heard all this quite plainly and was a little worried by it. He was thinking or asking the monk what lay

[1] See Appendix, p. 528

behind these puzzling words when he heard the Taoist say, 'We don't need to stay tether. Why don’t we part company here and each go about his own business? Three *kalpas* from now I shall wait far you on Bei-mang Hill. Having joined forces again there. we can go together to the Land of illusion to sign off.”

'Excellent!' said the other. And the two if them went off and soon were both lost to sight.

'There must have been something behind all this,' thought Shi-yin to himself. '1 really ought to hive asked him what he meant, but now it is too late.'

He was still standing outside his door brooding when Jia Yu-cun, the poor student who lodged at the Bottle-gourd Temple next door, came up to him. Yu-cun was a native of Hu-zhou and came from a family of scholars and bureaucrats which had, however, fallen on bad times when Yu-cun was born. The family Fortunes on both his father’s and mother’s side had all been ten spent. and the members of the family bad themselves gradually died off until only Yu-cun was left There were no prospect for him in his home town, so he had set off for the capital, in search of fame and fortune. Unfortunately he had got no further than Soochow when his funds ran out, and he had now been living there in poverty for a year, lodging in this temple and keeping himself alive by working as a copyist. For this reason Shi-yin saw a great deal of his company.

As soon as he caught sight of Shi-yin, Yu-cun clasped his hands in greeting and smiled ingratiatingly. 'I could see you standing there gazing, sir. Has anything been happening in the street?'

'No, no,' said Shi-yin. 'It just happened that my little girl was crying, so I brought her out here to amuse her. Your coming is most opportune, dear boy. I was beginning to feel most dreadfully bored. Won't you come into my little den, and we can help each other to while away this tedious hot day?'

So saying, he called for a servant to take the child indoors, while he himself took Yu-cun by the hand and led him into his study, where his boy served them both with tea. But they had not exchanged half-a-dozen words before one of the servants rushed in to say that 'Mr Yan had come to pay a call.' Shi-yin hurriedly rose up and excused himself: 'I seem to have brought you here under false pretences. I do hope you will forgive me. If you don't mind sitting on your own here for a moment, I shall be with you directly.'

Yu-cun rose to his feet too. 'Please do not distress yourself on my account, sir. I am a regular visitor here and can easily wait a bit.' But by the time he had finished saying this, Shi-yin was already out of the study and on his way to the guest-room.

Left to himself, Yu-cun was flicking through some of Shi-yin's books of poetry in order to pass the time, when he heard a woman's cough outside the window. Immediately he jumped up and peered out to see who it was. The cough appeared to have come from a maid who was picking flowers in the garden. She was an unusually good4ooking girl with a rather refined face: not a great beauty, by any means, but with something striking about her. Yu-cun gazed at her spellbound.

Having now finished picking her flowers, this anonymous member of the Zhen household was about to go in again when, on some sudden impulse, she raised her head and caught sight of a man standing in the window. His hat was frayed and his clothing threadbare; yet, though obviously poor, he had a fine, manly physique and handsome, well-proportioned features.

The maid hastened to remove herself from this male presence; but as she went she thought to herself, 'What a fine-looking man! But so shabby! The family hasn't got any friends or relations as poor as that. It must be that Jia Yu-cun the master is always on about. No wonder he says that he won't stay poor long. I remember hearing him say that he's often wanted to help him but hasn't yet found an opportunity.' And thinking these thoughts she could not forbear to turn back for another peep or two.

Yu-cun saw her turn back and, at once assuming that she had taken a fancy to him, was beside himself with delight. What a perceptive young woman she must be, he thought, to have seen the genius underneath the rags! A real friend in trouble!

After a while the boy came in again and Yu-cun elicited from him that the visitor in the front room was now staying to dinner. It was obviously out of the question to wait much longer, so he slipped down the passage-way

at the side of the house and let himself out by the back gate. Nor did Shi-yin invite him round again when, having at last seen off his visitor, he learned that Yu-cun had already left.

But then the Mid Autumn festival arrived and, after the family cdnvivialities were over, Shi-yin had a little dinner for two laid out in his study and went in person to invite Yu-cun, walking to his temple lodgings in the moonlight.

Ever since the day the Zhens' maid had, by looking back twice over her shoulder, convinced him that she was a friend, Yu-cun had had the girl very much on his mind, and now that it was festival time, the full moon of Mid Autumn lent an inspiration to his romantic impulses which finally resulted in the following octet:

‘Ere on ambition's path my feet are set,
Sorrow comes often this poor heart to fret.
Yet, as my brow contracted with new care,
Was there not one who, parting, turned to stare?
Dare I, that grasp at shadows in the wind,
Hope, underneath the moon, a friend to find?
Bright orb, if with my plight you sympathize,
Shine first upon the chamber where she lies.'

Having delivered himself of this masterpiece, Yu-cun's thoughts began to run on his unrealized ambitions and, after much head-scratching and many heavenward glances accompanied by heavy sighs, he produced the following couplet, reciting it in a loud, ringing voice which caught the ear of Shi-yin, who chanced at that moment to be arriving:

'The jewel in the casket bides till one shall come to buy.
The jade pin in the drawer hides, waiting its time to fly.'[2]

Shi-yin smiled. 'You are a man of no mean ambition, Yu-cun.'

'Oh no!' Yu-cun smiled back deprecatingly. 'You are too flattering. I was merely reciting at random from the lines of some old poet. But what brings you here, sir?'

'Tonight is Mid Autumn night,' said Shi-yin. ‘People call it the Festival of Reunion. It occurred to me that you might be feeling rather lonely here in your monkery, so I have arranged for the two of us to take a little wine together in my study. I hope you will not refuse to join me.'

Yu-cun made no polite pretence of declining. 'Your kindness is more than I deserve,' he said. 'I accept gratefully.' And he accompanied Shi-yin back to the study next door.

Soon they had finished their tea. Wine and various choice dishes were brought in and placed on the table, already laid out with cups, plates, and so forth, and the two men took their places and began to drink. At first they were rather slow and ceremonious; but gradually, as the conversation grew more animated, their potations too became more reckless and uninhibited. The sounds of music and singing which could now be heard from every house in the neighbourhood and the full moon which shone with cold brilliance overhead seemed to increase their elation, so that the cups were emptied almost as soon as they touched their lips, and Yu-cun, who was already a sheet or so in the wind, was seized with an irrepressible excitement to which he presently gave expression in the form of a quatrain, ostensibly on the subject of the moon) but really about the ambition he had hitherto been at some pains to conceal:

[2] Yu-cun is thinking of the jade hairpin given by a visiting fairy to an early Chinese emperor which later turned into a white swallow and flew away into the sky. Metaphors of flying and ‘climbing the sky’ were frequently used for success in the Civil Service examinations.

'In thrice five nights her perfect O is made,
Whose cold light bathes each marble balustrade.
As her bright wheel starts on its starry ways,
On earth ten thousand heads look up and gaze.'

'Bravo!' said Shi-yin loudly. 'I have always insisted that you were a young fellow who would go up in the world, and now, in these verses you have just recited, I see an augury of your ascent. In no time at all we shall see you up among the clouds! This calls for a drink!' And, saying this, he poured Yu-cun a large cup of wine.

Yu-cun drained the cup, then, surprisingly, sighed:

'Don't imagine the drink is making me boastful, but I really do believe that if it were just a question of having the sort of qualifications now in demand, I should stand as good a chance as any of getting myself on to the list of candidates. The trouble is that I simply have no means of laying my hands on the money that would be needed for lodgings and travel expenses. The journey to the capital is a long one, and the sort of money I can earn from my copying is not enough—'

'Why ever didn't you say this before?' said Shi-yin interrupting him. 'I have long wanted to do something about this, but on all the occasions I have met you previously, the conversation has never got round to this subject, and I haven't liked to broach it for fear of offending you. Well, now we know where we are. I am not a very clever man, but at least I know the right thing to do when I see it. Luckily, the next Triennial is only a few months ahead. You must go to the capital without delay. A spring examination triumph will make you feel that all your studying has been worth while. I shall take care of all your expenses. It is the least return I can make for your friendship.' And there and then he instructed his boy to go with all speed and make up a parcel of fifty tales of the best refined silver and two suits of winter clothes.

'The almanac gives the nineteenth as a good day for travelling,' he went on, addressing Yu-cun again. 'You can set about hiring a boat for the journey straight away. How delightful it will be to meet again next winter when you have distinguished yourself by soaring to the top over all the other candidates!'

Yu-cun accepted the silver and the clothes with only the most perfunctory word of thanks and without, apparently, giving them a further moment's thought, for he continued to drink and laugh and talk as if nothing had happened. It was well after midnight before they broke up.

After seeing Yu-cun off, Shi-yin went to bed and slept without a break until the sun was high in the sky next morning. When he awoke, his mind was still running on the conversation of the previous night. He thought he would write a couple of introductory letters for Yu-cun to take with him to the capital, and arrange for him to call on the family of an official be was acquainted with who might be able to put him up; but when he sent a servant to invite him over, the servant brought back word from the temple as follows:

'The monk says that Mr Jia set out for the capital at five o'clock this morning, sir. He says he left a message to pass on to you. He said to tell you, "A scholar should not concern himself with almanacs, but should act as the situation demands," and he said there wasn't time to say good-bye.'

So Shi-yin was obliged to let the matter drop.

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It is a true saying that 'time in idleness is quickly spent'. In no time at all it was Fifteenth Night, and Shi-yin sent little Ying-lian out, in the charge of one of the servants called Calamity, to see the mummers and the coloured lanterns. It was near midnight when Calamity, feeling an urgent need to relieve his bladder, put Ying4ian down on someone's doorstep while he went about his business, only to find, on his return, that the child was nowhere to be seen. Frantically he searched for her throughout the rest of the night; but when day dawned and he had still not found her, he took to his heels[3] not dating to face his master and mistress, and made off for another part of the

country.

Shi-yin and his wife knew that something must be wrong when their little girl failed to return home all night. Then a search was made; but all those sent out were obliged in the end to report that no trace of her could be found.

The shock of so sudden a loss to a middle-aged couple who had only ever had the one daughter can be imagined. In tears every day and most of the night, they almost lost the will to go on living, and after about a month like this first Shi-yin and then his wife fell ill, so that doctors and diviners were in daily attendance on them.

Then, on the fifteenth of the third month, while frying cakes for an offering, the monk of Bottle-gourd Temple carelessly allowed the oil to catch alight, which set fire to the paper window. And, since the houses in this area all had wooden walls and bamboo fences—though also, doubtless, because they were doomed to destruction anyway-the fire leaped from house to house until the whole street was blazing away like a regular Fiery Mountain; and though the firemen came to put it out, by the time they arrived the fire was well under way and long past controlling, and roared away all night long until it had burnt itself Out, rendering heaven knows how many families homeless in the process.

Poor Zhens! Though they and their handful of domestics escaped unhurt, their house, which was only next door to the temple, was soon reduced to a heap of rubble, while Shi-yin stood by helpless, groaning and stamping in despair.

After some discussion with his wife, Shi-yin decided that they should move to their farm in the country; but a series of crop failures due to flooding and drought had led to widespread brigandage in those parts, and government troops were out everywhere hunting down the mutinous peasants and making arrests. In such conditions it was impossible to settle on the farm, so Shi-yin sold the land and, taking only two of the maids with them, went with his wife to seek refuge with his father-in4aw, Feng Su.

This Feng Su was a Ru-zhou man who, though only a farmer by calling, had a very comfortable sufficiency. He was somewhat displeased to see his son-in-law arriving like a refugee on his doorstep; but fortunately *Shi- yin* had on him the money he had realized from the sale of the farm, and this he now entrusted to his father-in-law to buy for him, as and when he could, a house and land on which he could depend for his future livelihood. Feng Su embezzled about half of this sum and used the other half to provide him with a ruinous cottage and some fields of poor, thin soil.

A scholar, with no experience of business or agricultural matters, Shi-yin now found himself poorer after a year or two of struggle than when he had started. Feng Su would treat him to a few pearls of rustic wisdom whenever they met, but behind his back would grumble to all and sundry about 'incompetents' and 'people who liked their food but were too lazy to work for it', which caused Shi-yin great bitterness when it came to his ears. The anxieties and injustices which now beset him, coming on top of the shocks he had suffered a year or two previously, left a man of his years with little resistance to the joint onslaught of poverty and ill-health, and gradually he began to betray the unmistakable symptoms of a decline.

One day, wishing to take his mind off his troubles for a bit, he had dragged himself, stick in hand, to the main road, when it chanced that he suddenly caught sight of a Taoist with a limp—a crazy, erratic figure in hempen sandals and tattered clothes, who chanted the following words to himself as he advanced towards him:

'Men all know that salvation should be won,
But with ambition won't have done, have done.
Where are the famous ones of days gone by?
In grassy graves they lie now, every one.

Men all know that salvation should be won,
But with their riches won't have done, have done.
Each day they grumble they've not made enough.
When they've enough, it's goodnight everyone

Men all know that salvation should be won,
But with their loving wives they won't have done.
The darlings every day protest their love:
But once you're dead, they're off with another one.
Men all know that salvation should be won,
But with their children won't have done, have done.
Yet though of patents fond there is no lack,
Of grateful children saw I ne'er a one.'

Shi-yin approached the Taoist and questioned him. 'what is a" this you are saying? All I can make out is a lot of "won" and "done

'If you can make out "won" and "done",' replied the Taoist with a smile, 'you may be said to have understood; for in all the affairs of this world what is won is done, and what is done is won; for whoever has not yet done has not yet won, and in order to have won, one must first have done. I shall call my song the "Won-Done Song"'

Shi-yin had always been quick-witted, and on hearing these words a flash of understanding had illuminated his mind. He therefore smiled back at the Taoist: 'Wait a minute! How would you like me to provide your "Won-Done Song" with a commentary?

'Please do!' said the Taoist; and Shi-yin proceeded as follows:
'Mean hovels and abandoned halls
Where courtiers once paid daily calls:
Bleak haunts where weeds and willows scarcely thrive
Were once with mirth and revelry alive.
Whilst cobwebs shroud the mansion's gilded beams,
The cottage casement with choice muslin gleams.
Would you of perfumed elegance recite?
Even as you speak, the raven locks turn white.
Who yesterday her lord's bones laid in clay,
On silken bridal-bed shall lie today.
Coffers with gold and silver filled:
Now, in a trice, a tramp by all reviled.
One at some other's short life gives a sigh,
Not knowing that he, too, goes home—to die!
The sheltered and well-educated lad,
In spite of all your care, may turn out bad;

And the delicate, fastidious maid
End in a foul stews, plying a shameful trade.
The judge whose hat is too small for his head
Wears, in the end, a convict's cangue instead.
Who shivering once in rags bemoaned his fate,

Today finds fault with **scarlet** robes of state.
In such commotion does the world's theatre rage:
As each one leaves, another takes the stage.
In vain we roam:
Each in the end must call a strange land home.
Each of us with that poor girl may compare
Who sews a wedding-gown for another bride to wear.'

'A very accurate commentary!' cried the mad, lame Taoist, clapping his hands delightedly.

But Shi-yin merely snatched the satchel that hung from the other's shoulder and slung it from his own, and with a shout of 'Let's go!' and without even waiting to call back home, he strode off into the wide world in the company of the madman.

This event made a great uproar in the little town, and news of it was relayed from gossip to gossip until it reached the ears of Mrs Zhen, who cried herself into fits when she heard it. After consulting her father, she sent men out to inquire everywhere after her husband; but no news of him was to be

It was now imperative that she should move in with her parents and look to them for support. Fortunately she still had the two maids who had stayed on with her from the Soochow days, and by sewing and embroidering morning, noon and night, she and her women were able to make some contribution to her father's income. The latter still found daily occasion to complain, but there was very little he could do about it.

One day the elder of the two maids was purchasing some silks at the door when she heard the criers clearing the street and all the people began to tell each other that the new mandarin had arrived. She hid in the doorway and watched the guards and runners marching past two by two. But when the mandarin in his black hat and **scarlet** robe of office was borne past in his great chair, she stared for some time as though puzzled. 'where have I seen that mandarin before?' she wondered. 'His face looks extraordinarily familiar.' But presently she went into the house again and gave the matter no further thought.

That night, just as they were getting ready for bed, there was suddenly a great commotion at the door and a confused hubbub of voices shouting that someone was wanted at the *yamen* for questioning, which so terrified Feng Su that he was momentarily struck dumb and could only stare.

If you wish to know what further calamity this portended, you will have to read the following chapter.

CHAPTER 2

A daughter of the Jias ends her days
in Yangchow city
And Leng Zi-xing discourses on the Jias of
Rong-guo House

Hearing the clamour of yamen runners outside, Feng Su hurried to the door, his face wreathed in smiles, to ask what they wanted. ‘Tell Mr Zhen to step outside,’ they were shouting. ‘Hurry!’

Feng Su’s smile became even more ingratiating. ‘My name is Feng, not Zhen. My son-in-law’s name is Zhen, but he left home to become a Taoist more than a year ago. Could he be the one you want?’

‘“Feng” or “Zhen”, it’s all the same to us,’ said the runners; ‘but if you’re his father-in-law you’d better come along with us to see the magistrate.’ And they hustled him off, leaving the entire household in a state of

panic, quite at a loss to know what the trouble could be.

It was ten o'clock before Feng Su returned, and everyone pressed him to give a full account of what had transpired.

'It seems that the new mandarin is a Hu-zhou man called Jia. He used to be an acquaintance of Shi-yin's in the old days. He guessed that Shi-yin must have moved to these parts when he saw our Lucky in the doorway buying silks. That's why he sent the runners here. I explained what had happened to Shi-yin, and he seemed very upset. Then he asked me about Ying-lian, and I said she was lost while out watching the lanterns. "Never mind," he said, "wait till I send some people out to look for her. We shall have her back in no time." Then we chatted a bit longer, and lust as I was going, he gave me two taels of silver.'

Mrs Zhen could not help being affected by this account. But the rest of that night we pass over in silence.

Early next day a messenger arrived from Yu-cun bearing two packets of silver and four bolts of silk brocade for Mrs Zhen as a token of the sender's gratitude. There was also a confidential letter for Feng Su commissioning him to ask Mrs Zhen for Lucky's hand as Yu-cun's second wife. Enraptured at the prospect of doing a good turn for a mandarin, Feng Su hastened to urge upon his daughter the importance of complying with this request, and that very night Lucky was bundled into a small covered chair and carried off to the yamen. Yu-cun's delight goes without saying. Another hundred taels of silver were despatched to Feng Su, together with a number of good things for Mrs Zhen, to cheer and Sustain her until such time as her daughter's whereabouts could be discovered.

Lucky was, of course, the maid who had once turned back to look at Yu-cun when they were living at the house in Soochow. She could scarcely have foreseen at the time what singular good fortune that one glance would procure for her. But she was destined to be doubly fortunate. She had not been with Yu-cun more than a year when she gave birth to a son; and a mere six months later Yu-cun's first wife died, whereupon Lucky was promoted to fill her place and became Her Lady ship. As the proverb says,

Sometimes by chance
A look or a glance
May one's fortune advance.

*

When Yu-cun received the gift of money from Zhen Shi-yin he had left for the capital on the day after the festival. He had done well in the Triennial examination, passing out as a Palace Graduate, and had been selected for external service. And now he had been promoted to the magistracy of this district.

But although his intelligence and ability were outstanding, these qualities were unfortunately offset by a certain cupidity and harshness and a tendency to use his intelligence in order to outwit his superiors; all of which caused his fellow-officials to cast envious glances in his direction, with the result that in less than a year an unfavourable report was sent in by a senior official stating that his 'seeming ability was no more than a mask for cunning and duplicity' and citing one or two instances in which he had aided and abetted the peculations of his underlings or allied himself with powerful local interests in order to frustrate the course of justice.

The imperial eye, lighting on this report, kindled with wrath. Yu-cun's instant dismissal was commanded. The officials at the Prefecture, when notice that he was to be cashiered arrived from the Ministry, rejoiced to a man. But Yu-cun, in spite of all the shame and chagrin that he felt, allowed no glimmer of resentment to appear on his face. Indeed, he joked and smiled as before, and when the business of handing over was completed, he

took his wife and family and the loot he had accumulated during his years of office and having settled them all safely in his native Hu-zhou, set off, free as the air, on an extended tour of some of the more celebrated places of scenic interest in our mighty empire.

One day Yu~un chanced to be staying in the Yangchow area when he heard that the Salt Commissioner for that year was a certain Lin Ru-hai. This Lin Ru-hai had passed out Florilege, or third in the whole list of successful candidates, in a previous Triennial, and had lately been promoted to the Censorate. He was a Soochow man and had not long taken up his duties in Yangchow following his nomination by the emperor as Visiting Inspector in that area.

Lin Ru-hai came of an aristocratic family and was himself fifth in line since his ancestor's ennoblement. The original patent had been inheritable only up to the third generation, and it was only through the magnanimity of the reigning sovereign that an exceptional act of grace had extended it for a further generation in the case of Lin Ru-hai's father. Lin Ru-hai himself had therefore been obliged to make his way up through the examination system. It was fortunate for him that, though the family had up to his time enjoyed hereditary emoluments, it had nevertheless enjoined a high standard of education on all of its members.

Lin Ru-hai was less fortunate, however, in belonging to a family whose numbers were dwindling. He could still point to several related households, but they were all on the distaff side. There was not a single relation in the direct line who bore his name. Already he was fifty, and his only son had died the year before at the age of three. And although he kept several concubines, he seemed fated to have no son, and had all but resigned himself to this melancholy fact.

His chief wife, who had been a Miss Jia, had given him a daughter called Dai-yu. Both parents doted on her, and because she showed exceptional intelligence, conceived the idea of giving her a rudimentary education as a substitute for bringing up a son, hoping in this way somewhat to alleviate the sense of desolation left by the death of their only heir.

Now Jia Yu-cun had had the misfortune to catch a severe chill while staying in his lodgings at Yangchow, and after his recovery, found himself somewhat short of cash. He was therefore already looking around for some more permanent haven where he could rest and recuperate, when he chanced to run into two old friends who were acquainted with the new Salt Commissioner and who, knowing that the latter was looking for a suitable tutor for his daughter, took Yu-cun along to the yamen and introduced him, with the result that he was given the job.

Since Yu-cun's pupil was both very young and rather delicate, there were no regular hours of instruction; and as she had only a couple of little maids studying with her for company who stayed away when she did, Yu-cun's employment was far from arduous and left ample time for convalescence.

A year or more passed uneventfully and then, quite unexpectedly, Lin Ru-hai's wife took ill and died. Yu-cun's little pupil helped with the nursing throughout her mother's last illness and mourned for her bitterly after her death. The extra strain this placed on her always delicate constitution brought on a severe attack of a recurrent sickness, and for a long time she was unable to pursue her lessons.

Bored by his enforced idleness, Yu-cun took to going for walks as soon as lunch was over whenever the weather was warm and sunny.

One day a desire to savour country sights and sounds led him outside the city walls, and as he walked along with no fixed destination in mind, he presently found himself in a place ringed with hills and full of murmuring brooks and tall stands of bamboo where a temple stood half-hidden among the trees. The walled approach to the gateway had fallen in and parts of the surrounding wall were in ruins. A board above the gate announced the temple's name:

while two cracked and worn uprights at the sides of the gate were inscribed with the following couplet:
(on the right-hand side)
As long as there is a sufficiency behind you, you press greedily forward.

(on the left-hand side)
It is only when there is no road in front of you that you think of turning back.

'The wording is commonplace to a degree,' Yu-cun reflected, 'yet the sentiment is quite profound. In all the famous temples and monasteries I have visited, I cannot recollect having ever seen anything quite like it. I shouldn't be surprised to find that some story of spectacular downfall and dramatic conversion lay behind this inscription. It might be worth going in and inquiring.'

But when he went inside and looked around, he saw only an ancient, wizened monk cooking some gruel who paid no attention whatsoever to his greetings and who proved, when Yu-cun went up to him and asked him a few questions, to be both deaf and partially blind. His toothless replies were all but unintelligible, and in any case bore no relation to the questions.

Yu-cun walked out again in disgust. He now thought that in order to give the full rural flavour to his outing he would treat himself to a few cups of wine in a little country inn and accordingly directed his steps towards the near-by village. He had scarcely set foot inside the door of the village inn when one of the men drinking at separate tables inside rose up and advanced to meet him with a broad smile.

'Fancy meeting you!'

It was an antique dealer called Leng Zi-xing whom Yu-cum had got to know some years previously when he was staying in the capital. Yu-cun had a great admiration for Zi-xing as a practical man of business, whilst Zi-xing for his part was tickled to claim acquaintanceship with a man of Yu-cun's great learning and culture. On the basis of this mutual admiration the two of them had got on wonderfully well, and Yu-cun now returned the other's greeting with a pleased smile.

'My dear fellow! How long have you been here? I really had no idea you were in these parts. It was quite an accident that I came here today at all. What an extraordinary coincidence!'

'I went home at the end of last year to spend New Year with the family,' said Zi-xing. 'On my way back to the capital I thought I would stop off and have a few words with a friend of mine who lives hereabouts, and he very kindly invited me to spend a few days with him. I hadn't got any urgent business waiting for me, so I thought I might as well stay on a bit and leave at the middle of the month. I came out here on my own because my friend has an engagement today. I certainly didn't expect to run into you here.'

Zi-xing conducted Yu-cun to his table as he spoke and ordered more wine and some fresh dishes to be brought. The two men then proceeded, between leisurely sips of wine, to relate what each had been doing in the years that had elapsed since their last meeting.

Presently Yu-cun asked Zi-xing if anything of interest had happened recently in the capital.

'I can't think of anything particularly deserving of mention,' said Zi-xing. 'Except, perhaps, for a very small but very unusual event that took place in your own clan there.'

'What makes you say that?' said Yu-cun, 'I have no family connections in the capital.'

‘Well, it’s the same name,’ said Zi-xing. ‘They must be the same clan.’

Yu-cun asked him what family he could be referring to.

‘I fancy you wouldn’t disown the Jias of the Rong-guo mansion as unworthy of you.’

‘Oh, you mean them,’ said Yu-cun. ‘There are so many members of my clan) it’s hard to keep up with them all. Since the time of Jia Fu of the Eastern Han dynasty there have been branches of the Jia clan in every province of the empire. The Rong-guo branch is, as a matter of fact, on the same clan register as my own; but since they are exalted so far above us socially, we don’t normally claim the connection, and nowadays we are completely out of touch with them.’

Zi-xing sighed. ‘You shouldn’t speak about them in that way, you know. Nowadays both the Rong and Ning mansions are in a greatly reduced state compared with what they used to be.’

‘When I was last that way the Rong and Ning mansions both seemed to be fairly humming with life. Surely nothing could have happened to reduce their prosperity in so short a time?’

‘Ah, you may well ask. But it’s a long story.’

‘Last time I was in Jinling,’ went on Yu-cun, ‘I passed by their two houses one day on my way to Shi-tou-cheng to visit the ruins. The Ning-guo mansion along the eastern half of the road and the Rong-guo mansion along the western half must between them have occupied the greater part of the north side frontage of that street. It’s true that there wasn’t much activity outside the main entrances, but looking up over the outer walls I had a glimpse of the most magnificent and imposing halls and pavilions, and even the rocks and trees of the gardens beyond seemed to have a sleekness and luxuriance that were certainly not suggestive of a family whose fortunes were in a state of decline.’

‘Well! For a Palace Graduate Second Class, you ought to know better than that! Haven’t you ever heard the old saying, “The beast with a hundred legs is a long time dying”? Although I say they are not as prosperous as they used to be in years past, of course I don’t mean to say that there is not still a world of difference between *their* circumstances and those you would expect to find in the household of your average government official. At the moment the numbers of their establishment and the activities they engage in are, if anything, on the increase. Both masters and servants all lead lives of luxury and magnificence. And they still have plenty of plans and projects under way. But they can’t bring themselves to economize or make any adjustment in their accustomed style of living. Consequently, though outwardly they still manage to keep up appearances, inwardly they are beginning to feel the pinch. But that’s a small matter. There’s something much more seriously wrong with them than that. They are not able to turn out good sons, those stately houses, for all their pomp and show. The males in the family get more degenerate from one generation to the next.’

‘Surely,’ said Yu-cun with surprise, ‘it is inconceivable that such highly cultured households should not give their children the best education possible? I say nothing of other families, but the Jias of the Ning and Rong households used to be famous for the way in which they brought up their sons. How could they come to be as you describe?’

‘I assure you, it is precisely those families I am speaking of. Let me tell you something of their history. The Duke of Ning-guo and the Duke of Rong-guo were two brothers by the same mother. Ning-guo was the elder of the two. When he died, his eldest son, Jia Dai-hua, inherited his post. Daihua had two sons. The elder, Jia Fu, died at the age of eight or nine, leaving only the second son, Jia Jing, to inherit. Nowadays Jia Jing’s only interest in life is Taoism. He spends all his time over retorts and crucibles concocting elixirs, and refuses to be bothered with anything else.

‘Fortunately he had already provided himself with a son, Jia Zhen, long before he took up this hobby. So,

having set his mind on turning himself into an immortal, he has given up his post in favour of this son. And what's more he refuses outright to live at home and spends his time fooling around with a pack of Taoists somewhere outside the city walls.

'This Jia Zhen has got a son of his own, a lad called Jia Rong, just turned sixteen. With old Jia Jing out of the way and refusing to exercise any authority, Jia Zhen has thrown his responsibilities to the winds and given himself up to a life of pleasure. He has turned that Ning-guo mansion upside down, but there is no one around who dares gainsay him.

'Now I come to the Rong household—it was there that this strange event occurred that I was telling you about. When the old Duke of Rong-guo died, his eldest son, Jia Dai-shan, inherited his emoluments. He married a girl from a very old Nanking family, the daughter of Marquis Shi, who bore him two sons, Jia She and Jia Zheng.

'Dal-shan has been dead this many a year, but the old lady is still alive. The elder son, Jia She, inherited; but he's only a very middling sort of person and doesn't play much part in running the family. The second son, though, Jia Zheng, has been mad keen on study ever since he was a lad. He is a very upright sort of person, straight as a die. He was his grandfather's favourite. He would have sat for the examinations, but when the emperor saw Dai-shan's testamentary memorial that he wrote on his death bed, he was so moved, thinking what a faithful servant the old man had been, that he not only ordered the elder son to inherit his father's position, but also gave instructions that any other sons of his were to be presented to him at once, and on seeing Jia Zheng he gave him the post of Supernumerary Executive Officer, brevet rank, with instructions to continue his studies while on the Ministry's payroll. From there he Jias now risen to the post of Under Secretary.

'Sir Zheng's lady was formerly a Miss Wang. Her first child was a boy called Jia Zhu. He was already a Licensed Scholar at the age of fourteen. Then he married and had a son. But he died of an illness before he was twenty. The second child she bore him was a little girl, rather remarkable because she was born on New Year's day. Then after an interval of twelve years or more she suddenly had another son. He was even more remarkable, because at the moment of his birth he had a piece of beautiful, clear, coloured jade in his mouth with a lot of writing on it. They gave him the name "Bao-yu" as a consequence. Now tell me if you don't think that is an extraordinary thing.'

'It certainly is,' Yu-cun agreed. 'I should not be at all surprised to find that there was something very unusual in the heredity of that child.'

'Humph,' said Zi-xing. 'A great many people have said that. That is the reason why his old grandmother thinks him such a treasure. But when they celebrated the First Twelve month and Sir Zheng tested his disposition by putting a lot of objects in front of him and seeing which he would take hold of, he stretched Out his little hand and started playing with some women's things –combs, bracelets, pots of rouge and powder and the like—completely ignoring all the other objects. Sir Zheng was very displeased. He said he would grow up to be a rake, and ever since then he hasn't felt much affection for the child. But to the old lady he's the very apple of her eye.

'But there's more that's unusual about him than that. He's now rising ten and unusually mischievous, yet his mind is as sharp as a needle. You wouldn't find one in a hundred to match him. Some of the childish things he says are most extraordinary. He'll say, "Girls are made of water and boys are made of mud. When I am with girls I feel fresh and clean' but when I am with boys I feel stupid and nasty." Now isn't that priceless! He'll be a lady-killer when he grows up, no question of that.'

Yu-cun's face assumed an expression of unwonted severity. 'Not so. By no means. It is a pity that none of you seem to understand this child's heredity. Most likely even my esteemed kinsman Sir Jia Zheng is mistaken in

treating the boy as a future libertine. This is something that no one but a widely read person, and one moreover well-versed in moral philosophy and in the subtle arcana of metaphysical science could possibly understand.'

Observing the weighty tone in which these words were uttered, Zi-xing hurriedly asked to be instructed, and Yu-cun proceeded as follows:

'The generative processes operating in the universe provide the great majority of mankind with natures in which good and evil are commingled in more or less equal proportions. Instances of exceptional goodness and exceptional badness are produced by the operation of beneficent or noxious ethereal influences, of which the former are symptomatized by the equilibrium of society and the latter by its disequilibrium.

'*Thus*,

Yao,
Shun,
Yu,
Tang,
King Wen,
King Wu,
the Duke of Zhou,
the Duke of Shao,
Confucius,
Mencius,
Dong Zhong-shu,
Han Yu,
Zhou Dun-yi,
the Cheng brothers,
Zhu Xi and
Zhang Zai

—all instances of exceptional goodness - were born under the influence of benign forces, and all sought to promote the well-being of the societies in which they lived; whilst

Chi You,
Gong Gong,
Jie,
Zhou,
the First Qin Emperor,
Wang Mang,
Cao Cao,
Huan Wen,
An Lu-shan and
Qin Kuai

—all instances of exceptional badness—were born under the influence of harmful forces, and all sought to disrupt the societies in which they lived.

'*Now*, the good cosmic fluid with which the natures of the exceptionally good are compounded is a pure, quintessential humour; whilst the evil fluid which infuses the natures of the exceptionally bad is a cruel, perverse

humour.

'*Therefore*, our age being one in which beneficent ethereal influences are in the ascendant, in which the reigning dynasty' is well-established and society both peaceful and prosperous, innumerable instances are to be found, from the palace down to the humblest cottage, of individuals endowed with the pure, quintessential humour.

'*Moreover*, an unused surplus of this pure, quintessential humour, unable to find corporeal lodgment, circulates freely abroad until it manifests itself in the form of sweet dews and balmy winds, asperged and effused for the enrichment and refreshment of all terrestial life.

'*Consequently*, the cruel and perverse humours, unable to circulate freely in the air and sunlight, subside, by a process of incrassation and coagulation, into the bottoms of ditches and ravines.

Now, should these incrassate humours chance to be stirred or provoked by wind or weather into a somewhat more volatile and active condition, it sometimes happens that a stray wisp or errant flocculus may escape from the fissure or concavity in which they are contained; and if some of the pure, quintessential humour should chance to be passing overhead at that same moment, the two will become locked in irreconcilable conflict, the good refusing to yield to the evil, the evil persisting in its hatred of the good. And just as wind, water, thunder and lightning meeting together over the earth can neither dissipate nor yield one to another but produce an explosive shock resulting in the downward emission of rain, so does this clash of humours result in the forcible downward expulsion of the evil humour, which, being thus forced down-wards, will find its way into some human creature.

> 'Such human recipients, whether they be male or female, since they are already amply endowed with the benign humour before the evil humour is injected, are incapable of becoming either greatly good or greatly bad; but place them in the company of ten thousand others and you will find that they are superior to all the rest in sharpness and intelligence and inferior to all the rest in perversity, wrongheadedness and eccentricity. Born into a rich or noble household they are likely to become great lovers or the occasion of great love in others; in a poor but well-educated household they will become literary rebels or eccentric aesthetes; even if they are born in the lowest stratum of society they are likely to become great actors or famous *hetaerae*. Under no circumstances will you find them in servile or menial positions, content to be at the beck and call of mediocrities.

'For examples I might cite:

Xu You,
Tao Yuan-ming,
Ruan Ji,
Ji Kang,
Liu Ling,
the Wang and Xie clans of the Jin period,
Gu Kai-zhi,
the last ruler of Chen,
the emperor Ming-huang of the Tang dynasty,
the emperor Hui-zong of the Song dynasty,
Liu Ting-zhi,

Wen Ting-yun,
Mi Fei,
Shi Yan-nian,
Liu Yong and
Qin Guan;

Or, from more recent centuries:

Ni Zan,
Tang Yin and
Zhu Yun-ming;

or again, for examples of the last type:

Li Gui-nian,
Huang Fan-chuo,
Jing Xin-mo,
Zhuo Wen-jun,
Little **Red** Duster,
Xue Tao,
Cul Ying-ying and
Morning Cloud.

All of these, though their circumstances differed, were essentially the same.'

'You mean' Zi-xing interposed,

'Zhang victorious is a hero,
Zhang beaten is a lousy knave?'

'Precisely so,' said Yu-cun. 'I should have told you that during the two years after I was cashiered I travelled extensively in every province of the empire and saw quite a few remarkable children in the course of my travels; so that just now when you mentioned this Bao-yu I felt pretty certain what type of boy he must be. But one doesn't need to go very far afield for another example. There is one in the Zhen family in Nanking—I am referring to the family of the Zhen who is Imperial Deputy Director-General of the Nanking Secretariat. Perhaps you know who I mean?'

'Who doesn't? said Zi-xing. 'There is an old family connection between the Zhen family and the Jias of whom we have just been speaking, and they are still on very close terms with each other. I've done business with them myself for longer than I'd care to mention.'

'Last year when I was in Nanking,' said Yu-cun, smiling at the recollection, 'I was recommended for the post of tutor in their household. I could tell at a glance, as soon as I got inside the place, that for all the ducal splendour this was a family "though rich yet given to courtesy", in the words of the Sage, and that it was a rare piece of luck to have got a place in it. But when I came to teach my pupil, though he was only at the first year primary stage, he gave me more trouble than an examination candidate.

‘He was indeed a comedy. He once said, “I must have two girls to do my lessons with me if I am to remember the words and understand the sense. Otherwise my mind will simply not work.” And he would often tell the little pages who waited on him, “The word ‘girl’ is very precious and very pure. It is much more rare and precious than all the rarest beasts and birds and plants in the world. So it is most extremely important that you should never, never violate it with your coarse mouths and stinking breath. Whenever you need to say it, you should first rinse your mouths out with clean water and scented tea. And if ever I catch you slipping up, I shall have holes drilled through your teeth and lace them up together.”

‘There was simply no end to his violence and unruliness. Yet as soon as his lessons were over and he went inside to visit the girls of the family, he became a completely different person—all gentleness and calm, and as intelligent and well-bred as you please.

‘His father gave him several severe beatings but it made no difference. Whenever the pain became too much for him he would start yelling “Girls! girls!” Afterwards, when the girls in the family got to hear about it, they made fun of him. “Why do you always call to us when you are hurt? I suppose you think we shall come and plead for you to be let off. You ought to be ashamed of yourself!” But you should have heard his answer. He said, “Once when the pain was very bad, I thought that perhaps if I shouted the word ‘girls’ it might help to ease it. Well,” he said, “I just called out once, and the pain really was quite a bit better. So now that I have found this secret remedy, I just keep on shouting ‘Girls! girls! girls! ‘whenever the pain is at its worst.” I could not help laughing.

‘But because his grandmother doted on him so much, she was always taking the child’s part against me and his father. In the end I had to hand in my notice. A boy like that will never be able to keep up the family traditions or listen to the advice of his teachers and friends. The pity of it is, though, that the girls in that family are all exceptionally good.’

‘The three at present in the Jia household are also very fine girls,’ said Zi-xing. ‘Sir Jia Zheng’s eldest girl, Yuanchun, was chosen for her exceptional virtue and cleverness to be a Lady Secretary in the Imperial Palace. The next in age after her and eldest of the three still at home is called Yingchun. She is the daughter of Sir Jia She by one of his secondary wives. After her comes another daughter of Sir Zheng’s, also a concubine’s child, called Tan-chun. The youngest, Xi-chun, is sister-german to Mr Jia Zhen of the Ning-guo mansion. Old Lady Jia is very fond of her granddaughters and keeps them all in her own apartments on the Rong-guo side. They all study together, and I have been told that they are doing very well.’

‘*One of* the things I liked about the Zhen family,’ said Yu-cun, ‘was their custom of giving the girls the same sort of names as the boys, unlike the majority of families who invariably use fancy words like *“chun”*, *“hong”*, *“xiang”*, *“yu”*, and so forth. How comes it that the Jias should have followed the vulgar practice in this respect?’

‘They didn’t,’ said Zi-xing. ‘The eldest girl was called “Yuan-chun” because she was in fact born on the first day of spring. The others were given names with *“chun”* in them to match hers. But if you go back a generation, you will find that among the Jias too the girls had names exactly like the boys’.

‘I can give you proof. Your present employer’s good lady is sister-german to Sir She and Sir Zheng of the Rong household. Her name, before she married, was Jia Mm. If you don’t believe me, you make a few inquiries when you get home and you’ll find it is so.’

Yu-cun clapped his hands with a laugh. ‘Of course! I have often wondered why it is that my pupil Dai-yu always pronounces *“mm”* as “mi” when she is reading and, if she has to write it, always makes the character with one or two strokes missing. Now I understand. No wonder her speech and behaviour are so unlike those of

ordinary children! I always supposed that there must have been something remarkable about the mother for her to have produced so remarkable a daughter. Now I know that she was related to the Jias of the Rong household, I am not surprised.

'By the way, I am sorry to say that last month the mother passed away.'

Zi-xing sighed. 'Fancy her dying so soon! She was the youngest of the three. And the generation before them are all gone, every one. We shall have to see what sort of husbands they manage to find for the younger generation!'

'Yes, indeed,' said Yu-cun. 'Just now you mentioned that Sir Zheng had this boy with the jade in his mouth and you also mentioned a little grandson left behind by his elder son. What about old Sir She? Surely he must have a son?'

'Since Sir Zheng had the boy with the jade, he has had another son by a concubine,' said Zi-xing, 'but I couldn't tell you what he's like. So at present he has two sons and one grandson. Of course, we don't know what the future may bring.

'But you were asking about Sir She. Yes, he has a son too, called Jia Lian. He's already a young man in his early twenties. He married his own kin, the niece of his Uncle Zheng's wife, Lady Wang. He's been married now £or four or five years. Holds the rank of a Sub-perfect by purchase. He's another member of the family who doesn't find responsibilities con-genial. He knows his way around, though, and has a great gift of the gab, so at present he stays at home with his Uncle Zheng and helps him manage the family's affairs. However, ever since he married this young lady I mentioned, everyone high and low has joined in praising *her*, and he has been put into the shade rather. She is not only a very handsome young woman, she also has a very ready tongue and a very good head - more than a match for most men, I can tell you.'

'You see, I was not mistaken,' said Yu-cun. 'All these people you and I have been talking about are probably examples of that mixture of good and evil humours I was describing to you.'

'Well, I don't know about that,' said Zi-xing. 'Instead of sitting here setting other people's accounts to rights, let's have another drink!'

'I am afraid I have drunk quite a lot while we were busy talking,' said Yu-cun.

Zi-xing laughed. 'There's nothing like a good gossip about other people's affairs for making the wine go down! I'm sure an extra cup or two won't do us any harm.'

Yu-cun glanced out of the window. 'It's getting late. We must be careful we don't get shut out of the city. Why not continue the conversation on our way back? Then we can take our time.

The two men accordingly rose from their seats, settled the bill for the wine, and were just about to start on their way, when a voice from behind called out, 'Yu-cun, congratulations! I've got some good news for you.'

Yu-cun turned to look.

But if you wish to know who it was, you will have to read the next chapter.

CHAPTER 3

Lin Ru-hai recommends a private tutor
to his brother-in-law
And old Lady Jia extends a compassionate welcome
to the motherless child

When Yu-cun turned to look, he was surprised to see that it was Zhang Ru-gui, a former colleague who had been cashiered at the same time and for the same reason as himself. Zhang Ru-gui was a native of these parts, and had been living at home since his dismissal. Having just wormed out the information that a motion put forward in the capital for the reinstatement of ex-officials had been approved, he had been dashing about ever since, pulling strings and soliciting help from potential backers, and was engaged in this activity when he unexpectedly ran into Yu-cun. Hence the tone of his greeting.

As soon as they had finished bowing to each other, Zhang Ru-gui told Yu-cun the good news) and after further hurried conversation they went their separate ways.

Leng Zi-xing, who had overheard the news, proposed a plan. Why should not Yu-cun ask his employer Lin Ru-hai to write to his brother-in-law Jia Zheng in the capital and enlist his support on his, Yu-cun's, behalf? Yu-cun agreed to follow this suggestion, and presently the two friends separated.

Back in his quarters, Yu-cun quickly hunted out a copy of the *Gazette*, and having satisfied himself that the news was authentic, broached the matter next day with Lin Ru-hai.

'It so happens that an opportunity of helping you has just presented itself,' said Ru-hai. 'Since my poor wife passed on, my mother-in-law in the capital has been worried about the little girl having no one to look after her, and has already sent some of her folk here by barge to fetch her away. The only reason she has so far not gone is that she has not been quite recovered from her illness. I was, however, only just now thinking that the moment to send her had arrived. And as I have Still done nothing to repay you for your kindness in tutoring her for me, you may be sure that now this opportunity has presented itself I shall do my very best to help you.

'As a matter of fact, I have already made a few arrangements. I have written this letter here entrusting my brother-in4aw with your affair, explaining my indebtedness to you and urging him to see it properly settled. I have also made it quite clear in my letter that any expenses which may be involved are to be taken care of; so you have nothing to worry about on that account.'

Yu-cun made an elaborate bow to his patron and thanked him profusely. He then ventured a question.

'I am afraid I do not know what your relation's position is at the capital. Might it not be a little embarrassing for a person in my situation to thrust himself upon him?'

Ru-hai laughed. 'You need have no anxiety on that score. My brothers-in-law in the capital are your own kinsmen. They are grandsons of the former Duke of Rong-guo. The elder one, Jia She, is an hereditary official of the First Rank and an honorary colonel; the younger one, Jia Zheng, is an Under Secretary in the Ministry of Works. He takes very much after his late grandfather: a modest, generous man, quite without the arrogance of the pampered aristocrat. That is why I have addressed this letter to him. If I did not have complete confidence in his willingness to help you, I should not have put your honour at risk by soliciting him; nor, for that matter, should I have taken the trouble to write the letter.'

Yu-cun now knew that what Zi-xing had told him was the truth and he thanked Lin Ru-hai once again.

'I have fixed the second day of next month for my little girl's journey to the capital,' said Ru-hai. 'If you cared to travel with her, it would be convenient for both of us.'

Yu-cun accepted the suggestion with eager deference. Everything, he thought to himself, was turning out very satisfactorily. Ru-hai for his part set about preparing presents for his wife's family and parting gifts for Yu-cun, all of which Yu-cun in due course took charge of.

At first his little pupil could not be persuaded to part from her father; but her grandmother was insistent that she should go, and Ru-hai added his own reasons.

'I'm half a century old now, my dear, and I have no intention of taking a second wife; so there will be no one here to act as a mother to you. It isn't, either, as if you had sisters who could help to take care of you. You know how often you are poorly. And you are still very young. It would be a great weight off my mind to know that you had your Grandmother Jia and your uncles' girls to fall back on. I really think you ought to go.'

After this Dai-yu could only take a tearful leave of her father and go down to the boat with her nurse and

the old women from the Rong mansion who had been sent to fetch her. There was a separate boat for Yu-cun and a couple of servant-boys to wait on him, and he too now embarked in the capacity of Dai-yu's escort.

In due course they arrived in the capital, and Yu-cun, dressed in his best and with the two servant-boys at his heels, betook himself to the gate of the Rong mansion and handed in his visiting-card, on which he had been careful to prefix the word 'kinsman' to his own name. By this time Jia Zheng had already seen his brother-in4aw's letter, and accorded him an interview without delay.

Yu-cun's imposing looks and cultivated speech made an excellent impression on Jia Zheng, who was in any case always well-disposed towards scholars, and preserved much of his grandfather's affability with men of letters and readiness to help them in any sort of trouble or distress. And since his own inclinations were in this case reinforced by his brother-in-law's strong recommendation, the treatment he extended to Yu-cun was exceptionally favourable. He exerted himself on his behalf to such good effect that on the very day his petition was presented Yu-cun's reinstatement was approved, and before two months were Out he was appointed to the magistracy of Ying-tian-fu in Nanking. Thither, having chosen a suitable day on which to commence his journey, and having first taken his leave of Jia Zheng, he now repaired to take up his duties.

But of him, for the time being, no more.

*

On the day of her arrival in the capital, Dai-yu stepped ashore to find covered chairs from the Rong mansion for her and her women and a cart for the luggage ready waiting on the quay.

She had often heard her mother say that her Grandmother Jia's home was not like other people's houses. The servants she had been in contact with during the past few days were comparatively low-ranking ones in the domestic hierarchy, yet the food they ate, the clothes they wore, and everything about them was quite out of the ordinary. Dai-yu tried to imagine hat the people who employed these superior beings must be like. When she arrived at their house she would have to watch every step she took and weigh every word she said, for if she put a foot wrong they would surely laugh her to scorn.

Dai-yu got into her chair and was soon carried through the city walls. Peeping through the gauze panel which served as a window, she could see streets and buildings more rich and elegant and throngs of people more lively and numerous than she had ever seen in her life before. After being carried for what seemed a very great length of time, she saw, on the north front of the east-west street through which they were passing, two great stone lions crouched one on each side of a triple gateway whose doors were embellished with animal-heads. In front of the gateway ten or so splendidly dressed flunkeys sat in a row. The centre of the three gates was closed, but people were going in and out of the two side ones. There was a board above the centre gate on which were written in large characters the words:

NING-GUO HOUSE
Founded and Constructed by
Imperial Command

Dai-yu realized that this must be where the elder branch of her grandmother's family lived. The chair proceeded some distance more down the street and presently there was another triple gate, this time with the legend

RONG-GUO HOUSE

above it.

Ignoring the central gate, her bearers went in by the western entrance and after traversing the distance of a bow-shot inside, half turned a corner and set the chair down. The chairs of her female attendants which were following behind were set down simultaneously and the old women got out. The places of Dai-yu's bearers were taken by four handsome, fresh-faced pages of seventeen or eighteen. They shouldered her chair and, with the old women now following on foot, carried it as far as an ornamental inner gate. There they set it down again and then retired in respectful silence. The old women came forward to the front of the chair, held up the curtain, and helped Dai-yu to get out.

Each hand resting on the outstretched hand of an elderly attendant, Dai-yu passed through the ornamental gate into a courtyard which had balustraded loggias running along its sides and a covered passage-way through the centre. The foreground of the courtyard beyond was partially hidden by a screen of polished marble set in an elaborate **red** sandalwood frame. Passing round the screen and through a small reception hall beyond it, they entered the large courtyard of the mansion's principal apartments. These were housed in an imposing five-frame building resplendent with carved and painted beams and rafters which faced them across the courtyard. Running along either side of the courtyard were galleries hung with cages containing a variety Of different-coloured parrots, cockatoos, white-eyes, and other birds. Some gaily-dressed maids were sitting on the steps of the main building opposite. At the appearance of the visitors they rose to their feet and came forward with smiling faces to welcome them.

'You've come just at the right time! Lady Jia was only this moment asking about you.'

Three or four of them ran to lift up the door-curtain, while another of them announced in loud tones,

'Miss Lin is here!'

As Dai-yu entered the room she saw a silver-haired old lady advancing to meet her, supported on either side by a servant. She knew that this must be her Grandmother Jia and would have fallen on her knees and made her kotow, but before she could do so her grandmother had caught her in her arms and pressing her to her bosom with cries of 'My pet!' and 'My poor lamb!' burst into loud sobs, while all those present wept in sympathy, and Dai-yu felt herself crying as though she could never stop. It was some time before those present succeeded in calming them both down and Dai-yu was at last able to make her kotow.

Grandmother Jia now introduced those present.

'This is your elder uncle's wife, Aunt Xing. This is your Uncle Zheng's wife, Aunt Wang. This is Li Wan, the wife of your Cousin Zhu, who died.'

Dai-yu kowtowed to each of them in turn.

'Call the girls!' said Grandmother Jia. 'Tell them that we have a very special visitor and that they need not do their lessons today.'

There was a cry of 'Yes ma'am' from the assembled maids, and two of them went off to do her bidding.

Presently three girls arrived, attended by three nurses and five or six maids.

The first girl was of medium height and slightly plumpish, with cheeks as white and firm as a fresh lychee and a nose as white and shiny as soap made from the whitest goose-fat. She had a gentle, sweet, reserved manner. To look at her was to love her.

The second girl was rather tall, with sloping shoulders and a slender waist. She had an oval face under whose well-formed brows large, expressive eyes shot Out glances that sparkled with animation. To look at her was to forget all that was mean or vulgar.

The third girl was undersized and her looks were still somewhat babyish and unformed.

All three were dressed in identical skirts and dresses and wore identical sets of bracelets and hair ornaments.

Dai-yu rose to meet them and exchanged curtseys and introductions. When she was seated once more, a maid served tea, and a conversation began on the subject of her mother: how her illness had started, what doctors had been called in, what medicines prescribed, what arrangements had been made for the funeral, and how the

mourning had been observed. This conversation had the foreseeable effect of upsetting the old lady all over again. ‘Of all my girls your mother was the one I loved the best,’ she said, ‘and now she’s been the first to go, and without my even being able to see her again before the end. I can’t help being upset!’ And holding fast to Dai-yu’s hand, she once more burst into tears. The rest of the company did their best to comfort her, until at last she had more or less recovered

Everyone’s attention now centred on Dai-yu. They observed that although she was still young, her speech and manner already showed unusual refinement. They also noticed the frail body which seemed scarcely strong enough to bear the weight of its clothes, but which yet had an inexpressible grace about it, and realizing that she must be suffering from some deficiency, asked her what medicine she took for it and why it was still not better.

‘I have always been like this,’ said Dai-yu. ‘I have been taking medicine ever since I could eat and been looked at by ever so many well-known doctors, but it has never done me any good. Once, when I was only three, I can remember a scabby-headed old monk came and said he wanted to take me away and have me brought up as a nun; but of course, Mother and Father wouldn’t hear of it. So he said, “Since you are not prepared to give her up, I am afraid her illness will never get better as long as she lives. The only way it might get better would be if she were never to hear the sound of weeping from this day onwards and never to see any relations other than her own mother and father. Only in those conditions could she get through her life without trouble.” Of course, he was quite crazy, and no one took any notice of the things he said. I’m still taking Ginseng Tonic Pills.’

‘Well, that’s handy,’ said Grandmother Jia. ‘I take the Pills myself. We can easily tell them to make up a few more each time.’

She had scarcely finished speaking when someone could be heard talking and laughing in a very loud voice in the inner courtyard behind them.

‘Oh dear! I’m late,’ said the voice. ‘I’ve missed the arrival of our guest.’

‘Everyone else around here seems to go about with bated breath,’ thought Dai-yu. ‘Who can this new arrival be who is 50 brash and unmannerly?’

Even as she wondered, a beautiful young woman entered from the room behind the one they were sitting in, surrounded by a bevy of serving women and maids. She was dressed quite differently from the others present, gleaming like some fairy princess with sparkling jewels and gay embroideries.

Her chignon was enclosed in a circlet of gold filigree and clustered pearls. It was fastened with a pin embellished with a fying phoenixes, from whose beaks pearls were suspended On tiny chains.

Her necklet was of **red** gold in the form of a coiling dragon. Her dress had a fitted bodice and was made of dark **red** silk damask with a pattern of flowers and butterflies in raised gold thread.

Her jacket was lined with ermine. It was of a slate-**blue** stuff with woven insets in coloured silks.

Her under-skirt was of a turquoise-coloured imported silk crêpe embroidered with flowers.

She had, moreover,

eyes like a painted phoenix,
eyebrows like willow-eaves,
a slender form,
seductive grace;
the ever-smiling summer face
of hidden thunders showed no trace;
the ever-bubbling laughter started
almost before the lips were parted.

‘You don’t know her,’ said Grandmother Jia merrily. ‘She’s a holy terror this one. What we used to call in Nanking a “peppercorn”. You just call her “Peppercorn Feng”. She’ll know who you mean!’

Dai-yu was at a loss to know how she was to address this Peppercorn Feng until one of the cousins whispered that it was ‘Cousin Lian’s wife’, and she remembered having heard her mother say that her elder uncle,

Uncle She, had a son called Jia Lian who was married to the niece of her Uncle Zheng's wife, Lady Wang. She had been brought up from earliest childhood just like a boy, and had acquired in the schoolroom the somewhat boyish-sounding name of Wang Xi-feng. Dai-yu accordingly smiled and curtseyed, greeting her by her correct name as she did so.

Xi-feng took Dai-yu by the hand and for a few moments scrutinized her carefully from top to toe before conducting her back to her seat beside Grandmother Jia.

'She's a beauty, Grannie dear! If I hadn't set eyes on her today, I shouldn't have believed that such a beautiful creature could exist! And everything about her so *distingue'!* She doesn't take after your side of the family, Grannie. She's more like a Jia. I don't blame you for having gone on so about her during the past few days - but poor little thing! What a cruel fate to have lost Auntie like that!' and she dabbed at her eyes with a handkerchief.

'I've only just recovered,' laughed Grandmother Jia. 'Don't you go trying to start me off again! Besides, your little cousin is not very strong, and we've only just managed to get *her* cheered up. So let's have no more of this!'

In obedience to the command Xi-feng at once exchanged her grief for merriment.

'Yes, of course. It was just that seeing my little cousin here put everything else out of my mind. It made me want to laugh and cry all at the same time. I'm afraid I quite forgot about you, Grannie dear. I deserve to be spanked, don't I?'

She grabbed Dai-yu by the hand.

'How old are you dear? Have you begun school yet? You mustn't feel home sick here. If there's anything you want to eat or anything you want to play with, just come and tell me. And you must tell me if any of the maids or the old nannies are nasty to you.'

Dai-yu made appropriate responses to all of these questions and injunctions.

Xi-feng turned to the servants.

'Have Miss Lin's things been brought in yet? How many people did she bring with her? You'd better hurry up and get a couple of rooms swept out for them to rest in.'

While Xi-feng was speaking, the servants brought in tea and various plates of food, the distribution of which she proceeded to supervise in person.

Dai-yu noticed her Aunt Wang questioning Xi-feng on the side:

'Have this month's allowances been paid out yet?'

'Yes. By the way, just now I went with some of the women to the upstairs storeroom at the back to look for that satin. We looked and looked, but we couldn't find any like the one you described yesterday. Perhaps you misremembered.'

'Oh well, if you can't find it, it doesn't really matter,' said Lady Wang. Then, after a moment's reflection, 'You'd better pick out a couple of lengths presently to have made up into clothes for your little cousin here. If you think of it, send someone round in the evening to fetch them!'

'It's already been seen to. I knew she was going to arrive within a day or two, so I had some brought out in readiness. They are waiting back at your place for your approval. If you think they are all right, they can be sent over straight away.'

Lady Wang merely smiled and nodded her head without saying anything.

The tea things and dishes were now cleared away, and Grandmother Jia ordered two old nurses to take Dai-ya round to see her uncles; but Uncle She's wife, Lady Xing, hurriedly rose to her feet and suggested that it would be more convenient if she were to take her niece round herself.

'Very well,' said Grandmother Jia. 'You go now, then. There is no need for you to come back afterwards.'

So having, together with Lady Wang, who was also returning to her quarters, taken leave of the old lady, Lady Xing went off with Dai-yu, attended across the courtyard as far as the covered way by the rest of the

company.

A carriage painted dark **blue** and hung with kingfisher-**blue** curtains had been drawn up in front of the ornamental gateway by some pages. Into this Aunt Xing ascended hand in hand with Dai-yu. The old women pulled down the carriage blind and ordered the pages to take up the shafts, the pages drew the carriage into an open space and harnessed mules to it, and Dai-yu and her aunt were driven Out of the west gate, eastwards past the main gate of the Rong mansion, in again through a big black4acquered gate, and up to an inner gate, where they were set down again.

Holding Dai-yu by the hand, Aunt Xing led her into a courtyard in the middle of what she imagined must once have been part of the mansion's gardens. This impression was strengthened when they passed through a third gateway into the quarters occupied by her uncle and aunt; for here the smaller scale and quiet elegance of the halls, galleries and loggias were quite unlike the heavy magnificence and imposing grandeur they had just come from, and ornamental trees and artificial rock formations, all in exquisite taste, were to be seen on every hand.

As they entered the main reception hall, a number of heavily made-up and expensively dressed maids and concubines, who had been waiting in readiness, came forward to greet them.

Aunt Xing asked Dai-yu to be seated while she sent a servant to call Uncle She. After a considerable wait the servant returned with the following message:

'The Master says he hasn't been well these last few days, and as it would only upset them both if he were to see Miss Lin now, he doesn't feel up to it for the time being. He says, tell Miss Lin not to grieve and not to feel homesick. She must think of her grandmother and her aunts as her own family now. He says that her cousins may not be very clever girls, but at least they should be company for her and help to take her mind off things. If she finds anything at all here to distress her, she is to speak up at once. She mustn't feel like an outsider. She is to make herself completely at home.'

Dai-yu stood up throughout this recital and murmured polite assent whenever assent seemed indicated. She then sat for about another quarter of an hour before rising to take her leave. Her Aunt Xing was very pressing that she should have a meal with her before she went, but Dai-yu smilingly replied that though it was very kind of her aunt to offer, and though she ought really not to refuse, nevertheless she still had to pay her respects to her Uncle Zheng, and feared that it would be disrespectful if she were to arrive late. She hoped that she might accept on another occasion and begged her aunt to excuse her.

'In that case, never mind,' said Lady Xing, and instructed the old nurses to see her to her Uncle Zheng's in the same carriage she had come by. Dai-yu formally took her leave, and Lady Xing saw her as far as the inner gate, where she issued a few more instructions to the servants and watched her niece's carriage out of sight before returning to her rooms.

Presently they re-entered the Rong mansion proper and Dai-yu got down from the carriage. There was a raised stone walk running all the way up to the main gate, along which the old nurses now conducted her. Turning right, they led her down a roofed passage-way along the back of a south-facing hall, then through an inner gate into a large courtyard.

The big building at the head of the courtyard was connected at each end to galleries running through the length of the side buildings by means of 'stag's head' roofing over the corners. The whole formed an architectural unit of greater sumptuousness and magnificence than anything Dai-yu had yet seen that day, from which she concluded that this must be the main inner hall of the whole mansion.

High overhead on the wall facing her as she entered the hall was a great **blue** board framed in gilded dragons, on which was written in large gold characters

THE HALL OF EXALTED FELICITY

with a column of smaller characters at the side giving a date and the words '.... written for Our beloved Subject, Jia Yuan,.Duke of Rong-guo', followed by the Emperor's private seal, a device containing the words 'kingly cares' and 'royal brush' in archaic seal-script.

A long, high table of carved **red** sandalwood, ornamented with dragons, stood against the wall underneath. In the centre of this was a huge antique bronze *ding*, fully a yard high, covered with a **green** patina. On the wall above the *ding* hung a long vertical scroll with an ink-painting of a dragon emerging from clouds and waves, of the kind often presented to high court officials in token of their office. The *ding* was flanked on one side by a smaller antique bronze vessel with a pattern of gold inlay and on the other by a crystal bowl. At each side of the table stood a row of eight **yellow** cedar-wood armchairs with their backs to the wall; and above the chairs hung, one on each side, a pair of vertical ebony boards inlaid with a couplet in characters of gold:

(on the right-hand one)

May the jewel of learning shine in this house mote effulgently than the sun and moon.

(on the left-hand one)

May the insignia of honour glitter in these halls more brilliantly than the starry sky.

This was followed by a colophon in smaller characters:

> With the Respectful Compliments of your Fellow-
> Student, Mu Shi, Hereditary Prince of Dong-an.

Lady Wang did not, however, normally spend her leisure hours in this main reception hall, but in a smaller room on the east side of the same building. Accordingly the nurses conducted Dai-yu through the door into this side apartment.

Here there was a large kang underneath the window, covered with a **scarlet** Kashmir rug. In the middle of the kang was a dark-red bolster with a pattern of medallions in the form of tiny dragons, and a long russet-**green** seating strip in the same pattern. A low rose-shaped table of coloured lacquer-work stood at each side. On the left-hand one was a small, square, four4egged *ding*, together with a bronze ladle, metal chopsticks, and an incense container. On the right-hand one was a narrow-waisted Ru-ware imitation *gu* with a spray of freshly cut flowers in it.

In the part of the room below the kang there was a row of four big chairs against the east wall. All had footstools in front of them and chair-backs and seat-covers in old rose brocade sprigged with flowers. There were also narrow side-tables on which tea things and vases of flowers were arranged, besides other furnishings which it would be superfluous to enumerate.

The old nurses invited Dai-yu to get up on the kang; but guessing that the brocade cushions arranged one on each side near the edge of it must be her uncle's and aunt's places, she deemed it more proper to sit on one of the chairs against the wall below. The maids in charge of the apartment served tea, and as she sipped it Dai-yu observed that their clothing, makeup, and deportment were quite different from those of the maids she had seen so far in other parts of the mansion.

Before she had time to finish her tea, a smiling maid came in wearing a dress of **red** damask and a black silk sleeveless jacket which had scalloped borders of some coloured material.

'The Mistress says will Miss Lin come over to the other side, please.'

The old nurses now led Dai-yu down the east gallery to a reception room at the side of the courtyard. This

too had a king. It was bisected by a long, low table piled with books and tea things. A much-used black satin back-rest was pushed up against the east wall. Lady Wang was seated on a black satin cushion and leaning against another comfortable4ooking back-rest of black satin somewhat farther forward on the opposite side.

Seeing her niece enter, she motioned her to sit opposite her on the kang, but Dai-yu felt sure that this must be her Uncle Zheng's place. So, having observed a row of three chairs near the kang with covers of flower-sprigged brocade which looked as though they were in fairly constant use, she sat upon one of those instead. Only after much further pressing from her aunt would she get up on the kang, and even then she would only sit beside her and not in the position of honour opposite.

'Your uncle is in retreat today,' said Lady Wang. 'He will see you another time. There is, however, something I have got to talk to you about. The three girls are very well-behaved children, and in future, when you are studying or sewing together, even if once in a while they may grow a bit high-spirited, I can depend on them not to go too far. There is only one thing that worries me. I have a little monster of a son who tyrannizes over all the rest of this household. He has gone off to the temple today in fulfillment of a vow and is not yet back; but you will see what I mean this evening. The thing to do is never to take any notice of him. None of your cousins dare provoke him.'

Dai-yu had long ago been told by her mother that she had a boy cousin who was born with a piece of jade in his mouth and who was exceptionally wild and naughty. He hated study and liked to spend all his time in the women's apartments with the girls, but because Grandmother Jia doted on him so much, no one ever dared to correct him. She realized that it must be this cousin her aunt was now referring to.

'Do you mean the boy born with the jade, Aunt?' she asked. 'Mother often told me about him at home. She told me that he was one year older than me and that his name was Bao-yu. But she said that though he was very willful, he always behaved very nicely to girls. Now that I am here, I suppose I shall be spending all my time with my girl cousins and not in the same part of the house as the boys. Surely there will be no danger of *my* provoking him?'

Lady Wang gave a rueful smile. 'You little know how things are here! Bao-yu is a law unto himself. Because your grand-mother is so fond of him she has thoroughly spoiled him. When he was little he lived with the girls, so with the girls he remains now. As long as they take no notice of him, things run quietly enough. But if they give him the least encouragement, he at once becomes excitable, and then there is no end to the mischief he may get up to. That is why I counsel you to ignore him. He can be all honey-sweet words one minute and ranting and raving like a lunatic the next. So don't believe anything he says.'

Dai-yu promised to follow her aunt's advice.

Just then a maid came in with a message that 'Lady Jia said it was time for dinner', whereupon Lady Wang took Dai-yu by the hand and hurried her out through a back door. Passing along a verandah which ran beneath the rear eaves of the hall they came to a corner gate through which they passed into an alley-way running north and south. At the south end it was traversed by a narrow little building with a short passage-way running through its middle. At the north end was a white painted screen wall masking a medium-sized gateway leading to a small courtyard in which stood a very little house.

'That,' said Lady Wang, pointing to the little house, 'is where your Cousin Lian's wife, Wang Xi-feng, lives, in case you want to see her later on. She is the person to talk to if there is anything you need.'

There were a few young pages at the gate of the courtyard who, when they saw Lady Wang coming, all stood to attention with their hands at their sides.

Lady Wang now led Dai-yu along a gallery, running from east to west, which brought them out into the courtyard behind Grandmother Jia's apartments. Entering these by a back entrance, they found a number of servants waiting there who, as soon as they saw Lady Wang, began to arrange the table and chairs for dinner. The ladies of the house themselves took part in the service. Li Wan brought in the cups, Xi-feng laid out the chopsticks, and Lady Wang brought in the soup.

The table at which Grandmother Jia presided, seated alone on a couch, had two empty chairs 6n either side. Xi-feng tried to seat Dai-yu in the one on the left nearer to her grandmother —an honour which she strenuously resisted until her grandmother explained that her aunt and her elder cousins' wives would not be eating with them, so that, since she was a guest, the place was properly hers. Only then did she ask permission to sit, as etiquette prescribed. Grandmother Jia then ordered Lady Wang to be seated. This was the cue for the three girls to ask permission to sit. Ying-chun sat in the first place on the right opposite Dai-yu, Tan-chun sat second on the left, and Xi-chun sat second on the right.

While Li Wan and Xi-feng stood by the table helping to distribute food from the dishes, maids holding fly-whisks, spittoons, and napkins ranged themselves on either side. In addition to these, there were numerous other maids and serving-women in attendance in the outer room, yet not so much as a cough was heard throughout the whole of the meal.

When they had finished eating, a maid served each diner with tea on a little tray. Dai-yu's parents had brought their daughter up to believe that good health was founded on careful habits, and in pursuance of this principle, had always insisted that after a meal one should allow a certain interval to elapse before taking tea in order to avoid indigestion. However, she could see that many of the rules in this household were different from the ones she had been used to at home; so, being anxious to conform as much as possible, she accepted the tea. But as she did so, another maid preferred a spittoon, from which she inferred that the tea was for rinsing her mouth

with. And it was not, in fact, until they had all rinsed out their mouths and washed their hands that another lot of tea was served, this time for drinking.

Grandmother Jia now dismissed her lady servers, observing that she wished to enjoy a little chat with her young grand children without the restraint of their grown-up presence.

Lady Wang obediently rose to her feet and, after exchanging a few pleasantries, went out, taking Li Wan and Wang Xi-feng with her.

Grandmother Jia asked Dai-yu what books she was studying.

'The Four Books,' said Dai-yu, and inquired in turn what books her cousins were currently engaged on.

'Gracious, child, they don't study books,' said her grandmother; 'they can barely read and write I'

While they were speaking, a flurry of footsteps could be heard outside and a maid came in to say that Bao-yu was back.

'I wonder,' thought Dai-yu, 'just what sort of graceless creature this Bao-yu is going to be I'

The young gentleman who entered in answer to her unspoken question had a small jewel-encrusted gold coronet on the top of his head and a golden headband low down over his brow in the form of two dragons playing with a large pearl.

He was wearing a narrow-sleeved, full-skirted robe of dark **red** material with a pattern of flowers and butterflies in two shades of gold. It was confined at the waist with a court girdle of coloured silks braided at regular intervals into elaborate clusters of knotwork and terminating in long tassels.

Over the upper part of his robe he wore a jacket of slate-**blue** Japanese silk damask with a raised pattern of eight large medallions on the front and with tasselled borders.

On his feet he had half4ength dress boots of black satin with thick white soles.

As to his person, he had:

a face like the moon of Mid-Autumn,

a complexion like flowers at dawn,

a hairline straight as a knife-cut,

eyebrows that might have been painted by an artist's brush,

a shapely nose, and eyes clear as limpid pools,

that even in anger seemed to smile,

and, as they glared, beamed tenderness the while.

Around his neck he wore a golden torque in the likeness of a dragon and a woven cord of coloured silks to which the famous jade was attached.

Dai-yu looked at him with astonishment. How strange! How very strange! It was as though she had seen him somewhere before, he was so extraordinarily familiar. Bao-yu went straight past her and saluted his grandmother, who told him to come after he had seen his mother, whereupon he turned round and walked straight out again.

Quite soon he was back once more, this time dressed in a completely different outfit.

The crown and circlet had gone. She could now see that his side hair was dressed in a number of small braids plaited with **red** silk, which were drawn round to join the long hair at the back in a single large queue of glistening jet black, fastened at intervals from the nape downwards with four enormous pearls and ending in a jewelled gold clasp. He had changed his robe and jacket for a rather more worn-looking rose-coloured gown, sprigged with flowers. He wore the gold torque and his jade as before, and she observed that the collection of objects round his neck had been further augmented by a padlock-shaped amulet and a lucky charm. A pair of ivy-coloured embroidered silk trousers were partially visible beneath his gown, thrust into black and white socks trimmed with brocade. In place of the formal boots he was wearing thick-soled **crimson** slippers.

She was even more struck than before by his fresh complexion. The cheeks might have been brushed with powder and the lips touched with rouge, so bright was their natural colour.

His glance was soulful,
yet from his lips the laughter often leaped;
a world of charm upon that brow was heaped;
a world of feeling from those dark eyes peeped.

In short, his outward appearance was very fine. But appearances can be misleading. A perceptive poet has supplied two sets of verses, to be sung to the tune of *Moon On West River*, which contain a more accurate appraisal of our hero than the foregoing descriptions.

I

Oft-times he sought Out what would make him sad;
Sometimes an idiot seemed and sometimes mad.
Though outwardly a handsome sausage-skin,
He proved to have but sorry meat within.
A harum-scarum, to all duty blind,
A doltish mule, to study disinclined;
His acts outlandish and his nature queer;
Yet not a whit cared he how folk might jeer!

2

Prosperous, he could not play his part with grace,
Nor, poor, bear hardship with a smiling face.
So shamefully the precious hours he'd waste
That both indoors and out he was disgraced.
For uselessness the world's prize he might bear;
His gracelessness in history has no peer.
Let gilded youths who every dainty sample

Not imitate this rascal's dire example!

'Fancy changing your clothes before you have welcomed the visitor!' Grandmother Jia chided indulgently on seeing Bao-yu back again. 'Aren't you going to pay your respects to your cousin?'

Bao-yu had already caught sight of a slender, delicate girl whom he surmised to be his Aunt Lin's daughter and quickly went over to greet her. Then, returning to his place and taking a seat, he studied her attentively. How different she seemed from the other girls he knew!

Her mist-wreathed brows at first seemed to frown, yet were not frowning;
Her passionate eyes at first seemed to smile, yet were not merry.
Habit had given a melancholy cast to her tender face;
Nature had bestowed a sickly constitution on her delicate frame.
Often the eyes swam with glistening tears;
Often the breath came in gentle gasps.
In stillness she made one think of a graceful flower reflected in the water;
In motion she called to mind tender willow shoots caressed by the wind.
She had more chambers in her heart than the martyred Bi Gan;
And suffered a tithe more pain in it than the beautiful Xi Shi.

Having completed his survey, Bao-yu gave a laugh. 'I have seen this cousin before.'

'Nonsense!' said Grandmother Jia. 'How could you P055-ibly have done?'

'Well, perhaps not,' said Bao-yu, 'but her face seems 80 familiar that I have the impression of meeting her again after a long separation.'

'All the better,' said Grandmother Jia. 'That means that you should get on well together.'

Bao-yu moved over again and, drawing a chair up beside Dai-yu, recommenced his scrutiny.

Presently: 'Do you study books yet, cousin?'

'No,' said Dai-yu. 'I have only been taking lessons for a year or so. I can barely read and write.'

'What's your name?'

Dai-yu told him.

'What's your school-name?'

'I haven't got one.'

Bao-yu laughed. 'I'll give you one, cousin. I think "Frowner" would suit you perfectly.'

'Where's your reference?' said Tan-chun.

'In the *Encyclopedia of Men and Objects Ancient and Modern* it says that somewhere in the West there is a mineral called "dai" which can be used instead of eye-black for painting the eyebrows with. She has this "dai" in her name and she knits her brows together in a little frown. I think it's a splendid name for her!'

'I expect you made it up,' said Tan-chun scornfully.

'What if I did?' said Bao-yu. 'There are lots of made-up things in books—apart from the *Four Books*, of course.'

He returned to his interrogation of Dai-yu.

'Have you got a jade?'

The test of the company were puzzled, hut Dai-yu at once divined that he was asking her if she too had a jade like the one he was born with.

'No,' said Dal-yu. 'That jade of yours is a very rare object. You can't expect everybody to have one.'

This sent Bao-yu off instantly into one of his mad fits. Snatching the jade from his neck he hurled it violently on the floor as if to smash it and began abusing it passionately.

'Rare object! Rare object! What's so lucky about a stone that can't even tell which people are better than others? Beastly thing! I don't want it!'

The maids all seemed terrified and rushed forward to pick it up, while Grandmother Jia clung to Bao-yu in alarm.

'Naughty, naughty boy! Shout at someone or strike them if you like when you are in a nasty temper, but why go smashing that precious thing that your very life depends on?'

'None of the girls has got one,' said Bao-yu, his face streaming with tears and sobbing hysterically. 'Only I have got one. It always upsets me. And now this new cousin comes here who is as beautiful as an angel and she hasn't got one either; so I *know* it can't be any good.'

'Your cousin did have a jade once,' said Grandmother Jia, coaxing him like a little child, 'but because when Auntie died she couldn't bear to leave her little girl behind, they had to let her take the jade with her instead. In that way your cousin could show her mamma how much she loved her by letting the jade be buried with her; and at the same time, whenever Auntie's spirit looked at the jade, it would be just like looking at her own little girl again.

'So when your cousin said she hadn't got one, it was only because she didn't want to boast about the good, kind thing she did when she gave it to her mamma. Now you put yours on again like a good boy, and mind your mother doesn't find Out how naughty you have been.'

So saying, she took the jade from the hands of one of the maids and hung it round his neck for him. And Bao-yu, after reflecting for a moment or two on what she had said, offered no further resistance.

At this point some of the older women came to inquire what room Dai-yu was to sleep in.

'Move Bao-yu into the closet-bed with me,' said Grandmother Jia, 'and put Miss Lin for the time being in the **green** muslin summer-bed. We had better wait until spring when the last of the cold weather is over before seeing about the rooms for them and getting them settled permanently.'

'Dearest Grannie,' said Bao-yu pleadingly, 'I should be perfectly all right next to the summer-bed. There's no need to move me into your room. I should only keep you awake.'

Grandmother Jia, after a moment's reflection, gave her consent. She further gave instructions that Dai-yu and Bao-yu were each to have one nurse and one maid to sleep with them. The rest of their servants were to do night duty by rota in the adjoining room. Xi-feng had already sent across some lilac-coloured hangings, brocade quilts, satin coverlets and the like for Dai-yu's bedding.

Dai-yu had brought only two of her own people with her from home. One was her old wet-nurse Nannie Wang, the other was a little ten-year-old maid called Snowgoose. Considering Snowgoose too young and irresponsible and Nannie Wang too old and decrepit to be of much real service, Grandmother Jia gave Dai-yu one of her own maids, a body-servant of the second grade called Nightingale. She also gave orders that Dai-yu and Bao-yu were to be attended in other respects exactly like the three girls: that is to say, apart from the one wet-nurse, each was to have four other nurses to act as chaperones, two maids as body-servants to attend to their washing, dressing, and so forth, and four or five maids for dusting and cleaning, running errands and general duties.

These arrangements completed, Nannie Wang and Nightingale accompanied Dai-yu to bed inside the tent-like summer-bed, while Bao-yu's wet-nurse Nannie Li and his chief maid Aroma settled him down for the night in a big bed on the other side of the canopy.

Like Nightingale, Aroma had previously been one of Grandmother Jia's own maids. Her real name was Pearl. Bao-yu's grandmother, fearful that the maids who already waited on her darling boy could not be trusted to look after him properly, had picked out Pearl as a girl of tried and conspicuous fidelity and put her in charge over them. It was Bao-yu who was responsible for the curious name 'Aroma'. Discovering that Pearl's surname was Hua, which means 'Flowers', and having recently come across the line

The flowers' aroma breathes of hotter days

in a book of poems, he told his grandmother that he wanted to call his new maid ‘Aroma’, so ‘Aroma’ her name thenceforth became.

Aroma had a certain dogged streak in her nature which had made her utterly devoted to Grandmother Jia as long as she was Grandmother Jia’s servant, but which caused her to become just as exclusively and single-mindedly devoted to Bao-yu when her services were transferred to him. Since she found his character strange and incomprehensible, her simple devotion frequently impelled her to remonstrate with him, and when, as invariably happened, he took not the least notice of what she said, she was worried and hurt.

That night, when Bao-yu and Nannie Li were already asleep, Aroma could hear that Dai-yu and Nightingale on their side of the canopy had still not settled down, so, when she had finished taking down her hair and making herself ready for bed, she tiptoed through the muslin curtains and in a friendly way inquired what was the matter. Dai-yu invited her to sit down, and when she had seated herself on the edge of the bed, Nightingale proceeded to tell her what was troubling her new mistress.

‘Miss Lin is all upset. She has just been crying her eyes out because she says she only just arrived here today, and yet already she has started young hopeful off on one of his turns. She says if that jade had been really smashed, it would have been all her fault. That’s what she’s so upset about. I’ve had no end of a job trying to comfort her.’

‘You mustn’t take on so, Miss,’ said Aroma. ‘You’ll see him do much stranger things than that before he’s finished. If you allow yourself to feel hurt every time he carries on like that, he will always be hurting you. Try not to be so sensitive; Miss!’

Dai-yu thanked her and promised to bear in mind what she had said, and after talking a little longer, they all settled down and went to sleep.

*

Rising early next day, they visited Grandmother Jia to wish her a good morning and then went over to Lady Wang’s. They found her closeted with Wang Xi-feng, deep in discussion of a letter which had just arrived from Nanking, and attended by two women who had come with a message from Lady Wang’s elder brother and sister-in-law. Tan-chun and the girls told Dai-yu, who knew nothing of the matter under discussion, that they were talking about Xue Pan, the son of their Aunt Xue who lived in Nanking.

It seemed that Xue Pan, relying on wealth and family pull to protect him from the consequences, had taken another man’s *life*. The case was at present under investigation by the Ying-tian-fu yamen. Their uncle Wang Zi-teng had been informed of it, and had sent these messengers to the members of the family in the Rong mansion to suggest that they should invite Xue Pan to the capital.

But the outcome of this discussion will be dealt with in the following chapter.

CHAPTER 4

The Bottle-gourd girl meets an
unfortunate young man
And the Bottle-gourd monk settles a
protracted lawsuit

When Dai-yu and the girls went to call on Lady Wang, they found her in the midst of discussing family affairs with the messengers from her elder brother and his wife and heard talk of their aunt's family in Nanking being involved in a case of manslaughter. Since Lady Wang was obviously preoccupied with this matter, the girls went off to call on Li Wan.

Li Wan's husband Jia Zhu had died young, but fortunately not without issue. He left her a son called Jia Lan who was now' just five years old and had already begun his schooling. Like most of the Jia women, Li Wan was the daughter of a distinguished Nanking official. Her father, Li Shou-zhong, had been a Director of Education.

Up to Li Shou-zhong's time, all members of the clan, including the women, had been given a first-class education; but when Li Shou-zhong became head of the family, he founded his educational policy for girls on the good old maxim 'a stupid woman is a virtuous one' and, when he had a daughter of his own, refused to let her engage in serious study. She was permitted to work her way through *The Four Books for Girls* and *Lives of Noble Women*, so that she might be able to recognize a few characters and be familiar with some of the models of female virtue of former ages; but overriding importance was to be attached to spinning and sewing, and even her name 'Wan', which means a kind of silk, was intended to symbolize her dedication to the needle.

Thanks to her upbringing, this young widow living in the midst of luxury and self-indulgence was able to keep herself like the 'withered tree and dead ashes' of the philosopher, shutting out everything that did not concern her and attending only to the duties of serving her husband's parents and bringing up her child. Whatever leisure this left her was devoted to her little sister-in-law and cousins, accompanying them at their embroidery or hearing them recite their lessons.

With such gentle companions to console her, Dai-yu, though a stranger and far from home, soon had nothing apart from her old father that she need worry about.

*

Let us now turn to the affairs of Jia Yu-cun, newly installed in the yamen at Ying-tian-fu.

No sooner had he arrived at his new post than a case involving manslaughter was referred to his tribunal. It concerned two parties in dispute over the purchase of a slave-girl. Neither had been willing to give way to the other, and in the ensuing affray one of the parties had been wounded and had subsequently died. After reading the papers in the case, Yu-cun summoned the plaintiff for questioning and received from him the following account of what had happened:

'The murdered man was my master, Your Honour. Although he did not realize it at the time, the girl he purchased had been kidnapped by the man who was selling her. My master paid him in advance, and arranged to receive the girl into his house three days from the date of purchase, the third day being a lucky day. The kidnapper, having already pocketed my young master's money, then quietly went off and sold her again to Xue. When we found this out, we went along to seize him and to collect the girl.

'But unfortunately this Xue turned Out to be a powerful Nanking boss, who evidently thought that by money and influence he could get away with anything. He set a crowd of his henchmen on to my young master and beat him up so badly that he died.

'Xue and his henchmen have now disappeared without trace, leaving only a few retainers who were not involved in the crime. But though it is a year since I first brought this charge, no one has yet done anything to help me. I beseech Your Honour to arrest the criminals and to uphold the course of justice I Both the living and the dead will be everlastingly grateful to you if you do!'

'This is monstrous!' said Yu-cun in a towering rage. 'Am I to understand that a man can be beaten to death and the murderer walk off scot-free with nobody lifting a finger to arrest him?' and he took up a warrant and was on the point of sending his runners to seize the murderer's dependants and bring them to court so that they might

be put to the torture, when he observed one of the ushers signalling to him with his eyes not to issue the warrant. His resolution somewhat shaken, he put it down again and adjourned to his private chambers, dismissing everyone except the usher, whom he ordered to remain behind in attendance.

When they were alone together the usher, with a broad smile on his face, came forward and touched his hand and knee to the ground in the Manchu salute.

'Your Honour has gone a long way up in the world during these past eight or nine years! I don't expect you would remember me!'

'Your face is certainly familiar,' said Yu-cun, 'but for the moment I simply can't place it.'

The usher smiled again. 'Has Your Honour forgotten the place you started from? Do you remember nothing of the old times in Bottle-gourd Temple?'

With a start of recognition, Yu-cun remembered. The usher had been a little novice in the temple where he once lodged

Finding himself homeless after the fire, and bethinking himself that a post in a yamen was a fine, gentlemanly way of earning a living, and being furthermore heartily sick of the rigours of monastic life, the little novice had taken advantage of his youth to grow his hair again and get himself a post as an usher. Small wonder that Yu-cun had failed to recognize him!

'Ah, so it *was* an old acquaintance!' said Yu-cun, grasping him warmly by the hand and urging him to sit down for a chat. But the usher would not be seated.

'Come,' said Yu-cun, 'as a friend of my early, hard-up days you are entitled to. After all, this is a private room. Why not?'

The usher permitted himself to perch one of his haunches sideways on the edge of a chair.

'Tell me,' said Yu-cun, 'why did you stop me issuing that warrant just now?'

'Your Honour is new to this post. Surely you must have provided yourself before you left with a copy of the *Mandarin's Life-Preserver* for this province?'

'What is the *Mandarin's Lift-Preserver?'* Yu-cun inquired curiously.

'Nowadays every provincial official carries a private hand-list with the names of all the richest, most influential people in his area. There is one for every province. They list those families which are so powerful that if you were ever to run up against one of them unknowingly, not only your job, but perhaps even your life might be in danger. That's why they are called "life-preservers".

'Now take this Xue you were dealing with just now. Your Honour couldn't possibly try conclusions with *him!* Why do you suppose this case has remained unsettled for so long? It's a straightforward enough case. The reason is simply that none of your predecessors dared touch it because of the unpleasantness and loss of face it would have caused them.'

While he was speaking he had been fishing for a copy of the *Mandarin's Lift-Preserver* in his pocket. This he now presented *10* Yu-cun for his inspection. It contained a set of doggerel verses in which were listed the big families and most powerful magnates of the area in which he was working. It went some-thing like this:

Shout hip hurrah
For the Nanking Jia!
They weigh their gold out
By the jar.
The Ah-bang Palace
Scrapes the sky,
But it could not house
The Nanking Shi.
The King of the Ocean
Goes along,

When he's short of gold beds,
To the Nanking Wang.
The Nanking Xue
So rich are they,
To count their money
Would take all day...

Before Yu-cun had time to read further, a warning chime from the inner gate and a shout outside the door announced the arrival of a Mr Wang on an official call. Yu-cun hastily donned the hat and robe of office which he had temporarily laid aside and went out to meet the visitor. About the length of time it would take to eat a meal elapsed before he returned and resumed his conversation with the usher.

'Those four families,' said the usher in answer to a question from Yu-cun, 'are all closely connected with each other. A loss for one is a loss for all. A gain for one is a gain for all. The Xue who has been charged with the manslaughter is one of the "Nanking Xue so rich are they". Not only can he count on the support of the other three Nanking families, he also has any number of family friends and connections of his own both at the capital and in the provinces. *Now* who are you going to arrest?'

'That's all very well,' said Yu-cun with an uneasy laugh, 'but how am I going to settle this case? Incidentally, I assume you know perfectly well where the criminal is hiding?'

'I wouldn't deceive Your Honour,' replied the usher with a grin, 'not only do I know where the criminal has gone but I also know who the kidnapper is and all about the poor devil who was killed. Let me tell you the whole story.

'The man who was killed was a poor country squire's son called Feng Yuan. His father and mother were both dead and he had no brothers. He lived off the income of a very small estate. He was eighteen or nineteen when he died. He was a confirmed queer and not interested in girls. Which shows that the whole business must have been fated, because no sooner did he set eyes on this girl than he at once fell in love with her—swore he would never have anything more to do with boys and never have any other woman but her. That was the idea of this waiting three days before she came to him. To make it seem more like a wedding and less like a sale.

'What he couldn't foresee, of course, was that the kidnapper would use this interval to resell her on the sly to Xue, hoping to pocket the money from both parties and then do a flit. Only he didn't get away with it. The two parties nabbed him before he could disappear and beat the daylights out of him. Both refused to take back their money, and both insisted that they wanted the girl. It was at this point that our young friend Xue called for his roughs to get to work on Peng Yuan. They beat him till he was hardly recognizable. Then they picked him up and carried him home. He died three days later.

'Now long before any of this happened, young Xue had made arrangements for a journey to the capital. So after killing Feng and carrying off the girl, he set off with his family, calm as you please, on the appointed day. There was no question of his running away because of the killing. In his eyes a trifling matter like taking another man's life was something for his junior clansmen or the servants to clear up in his absence.

'But never mind him. Who do you think the slave-girl is?'

'How in the world should I know?' said Yu-cun.

The usher smiled maliciously. 'You ought to, Your Honour! She is your great benefactress - Ying4ian, the little daughter of Mr Zhen, who used to Jive next door to Bottle-gourd Temple.'

'Good gracious!' said Yu-cun in astonishment. 'I had heard that she was kidnapped at the age of five. But how did she come to be sold so long after the kidnapping?'

'This type of kidnapper specializes in kidnapping very young girls and rearing them until they are twelve or thirteen for sale in other parts of the country. When she was little we used to play with Ying4ian at the temple nearly every day, so I knew her very well; and when I saw her again, even though it was after an interval of seven or eight years, I could tell it was her. She'd grown into a little woman in the meantime, but her features were still

the same; and to confirm it there was a tiny **red** birthmark right in the middle of her brow which I remembered.

'By a strange coincidence the kidnapper had rented one of my rooms, and one day when he was Out I put it to her who she was. But she said she was scared of being beaten and nothing would induce her to talk. She just kept insisting that the kidnapper was her real father, selling her because he had no money to pay his debts with. I kept on at her, cajoling and persuading, and in the end she broke down and cried. Said she didn't remember anything about her childhood. But there's no doubt in my mind. It's her, all right.

'The day young Feng met her and paid out the money for her, the kidnapper got drunk, and she opened up to me a bit. She was feeling very relieved. She said, "Today I think my tribulations are at last coming to an end." But then later, when she heard that she wasn't to be installed until after another three days, she began to lo6k worried and despondent again. I felt truly sorry for her, and sent the wife round to have a talk with her while the kidnapper was Out and give her a bit of encouragement.

'The wife said to her, "Mr Feng's insistence on waiting three days before taking you in shows that he doesn't intend to treat you like a servant. Besides," she said, "he's a very nice, handsome gentleman, and quite comfortably off. Normally he doesn't like the fair sex, yet here he is spending everything he has on your purchase. You can tell from that," she said, "how much he must care for you. You only have to be patient for another day or two," she said. "You've no cause to be downcast."

'Well, that seemed to cheer her up a bit, and she began to feel that life was going to be worth living.

'But only the day after that, by the most accursed stroke of bad luck which no one could possibly have foreseen, she was sold to Xue. Now if it had been anyone else, it wouldn't have mattered so much, but this young Xue, whose nickname is the Oaf King, is the world's most bad-tempered bully; and having spent money like water on buying the girl only to find that she wasn't willing, he knocked her about until she was half unconscious and dragged her off with him more dead than alive. Whether she's alive or dead now, I have no idea.

'And young Feng is really to be pitied! After a brief moment of happiness, before anything had come his way, he spent all his money and laid down his life for nothing!'

Yu-cun sighed sympathetically. 'Their meeting cannot have been coincidental. It must have been the working Out of some destiny. An atonement. Otherwise, how is one to account for Feng Yuan's sudden affection for that particular girl?

'And Ying-lian, after all those years of ill-treatment at the hands of her kidnapper, suddenly seeing a road to freedom opening in front of her - for she was a girl of feeling, and there is no doubt that they would have made a fine couple if they had succeeded in coming together—and then for this to have happened!

'And even though Xue may be far wealthier and better-placed than Feng was, a man like that is sure to have numbers of concubines and paramours and to be licentious and debauched in his habits - quite incapable of concentrating all his affections on one girl as Feng Yuan would have done.

'A real case of an ideal romance on the one hand and a pair of unlucky young things on the other adding up to make a tragedy!

'But a truce to this discussion of other people's affairs! Let us rather consider how this case is to be settled!'

'Your Honour used to be decisive enough in the old days,' said the usher with a smile. 'What has become of your old resolution today? Now, I was told that your promotion to this post was due to the combined influence of the Jias and the Wangs; and this Xue Pan is related to the Jias by marriage. Why not trim your sails to the wind in your handling of this case? Why not make a virtue of necessity by doing them a favour which will stand you in good stead next time you see them?'

'What you say is, of course, entirely correct,' said Yu-cun. 'But there is, after all, a human life involved in this case; and you have to remember that I have only just been restored to office by an act of Imperial clemency. I really cannot bring myself to pervert justice for private ends at the very moment when I ought to be doing my utmost to show my gratitude.'

The usher smiled coldly. 'What Your Honour says is no doubt very right and proper, but it won't wash. Not

the way things are in the world today! Haven't you heard the old saying "The man of spirit shapes his actions to the passing moment"? And there's another old saying: "It is the mark of a gentleman to avoid what is inauspicious". If you were to act in accordance with what you have just said, not only would you *not* be able to show your gratitude to the Emperor, but also you would probably put your own life in danger. If I were you, I should think very carefully before you do anything.'

Yu-cun lowered his head in thought. After a very long pause he asked, 'What do *you* think I ought to do?'

'I've thought of a very good solution,' said the usher. 'When you open court tomorrow, you should make a great display of authority. Send out writs, issue warrants for arrest, and so forth. You won't, of course, be able to arrest the culprits, and the plaintiffs will certainly not allow the matter to rest there; so what you do then is to arrest some of Xue's clansmen and servants for questioning. But in the meantime I shall have got to work on them on the side and arranged for them to report that Xue has died of sudden illness. This can be supported by the affidavits of the whole Xue clan and the people living in the neighbourhood.

'Then Your Honour has it put about that you have a gift for the planchette. You have an altar set up in the court and a planchette board installed on it and you issue an open invitation to any members of the public who want to to attend a séance. Then you say, "The spirit control gives judgment as follows:

'"The dead man, Feng Yuan, owed a debt of karma to Xue Pan from a former life and 'meeting his enemy in a narrow way', paid for it with his life. The sudden, unexplained illness which struck down Xue Pan was caused by the vengeful ghost of Feng Yuan come to claim its own. Since the tragedy was entirely due to the behaviour of the kidnapper, the kidnapper should be dealt with according to the full rigour of the law; but apart from him, all other parties are exonerated..." and so on and so forth.

'I shall secretly instruct the kidnapper to make a full confession, and when the public see that the judgment given by the planchette tallies with the confession made by the kidnapper, they will naturally have no suspicions.

'Then you award the Fengs compensation to cover funeral expenses and so on. And since die Xues are rolling in money, you can say anything you like. Five hundred, a thousand—it doesn't matter. There's no one of any importance on the Feng side, and in any case they're mainly in this for the money. So once they have got their compensation, they shouldn't give you any further trouble.

'What about that for a plan, Your Honour? You just think it over!'

Yu-cun laughed. 'Too risky! Let me turn it over in my mind a little longer. The main thing is to think of something that will stop people talking.'

And with this observation the two men concluded their discussion.

At next day's session a group of well-known associates of the wanted man were brought in and subjected by Yu-cun to careful questioning. It emerged, as the usher had said, that the Fengs were few in number and had brought this action solely in the hope of gaining some compensation, and that it was only because the Xues had, with the arrogance of the very rich and very powerful, refused to pay a penny, that the case had been brought to a standstill.

By a judicious bending of the law to suit the circumstances, Yu-cun managed to arrive at some sort of judgment whereby the plaintiffs received substantial compensation and went off tolerably well satisfied. He then hurriedly drafted and sent off two letters, one to Jia Zheng and one to Wang Zi-teng, Commandant, Metropolitan Barracks, in which he merely stated that their 'nephew's affair had been settled and there was no further cause for concern'.

Fearful that the now usher and quondam novice of Bottle-gourd Temple might talk to others about the days when he was an obscure and impoverished student, Yu-cun for some time went about in great discomfort of mind. Finally, however, he managed to catch him out in some misdemeanour or other and have him drafted for military service on a frontier outpost, after which he felt able to breathe freely again.

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But now no more of Yu-cun. Let us turn instead to Young Xue, the man who purchased Ying4ian and had Feng Yuan beaten to death. He was a native of Nanking and came of a refined and highly cultivated family, but having lost his father in infancy and been, as sole remaining scion of the stock, excessively indulged by a doting widowed mother, he had grown up into a useless lout. The family was immensely wealthy. As one of the official Court Purveyors they received money from the Privy Purse with which to make purchases for the Imperial Household.

Xue Pan, to give him his full name, was a naturally extravagant young man with an insolent turn of speech. He had been educated after a fashion, but could barely read and write. He devoted the greater part of his time to cock-fighting, horse-racing, and outings to places of scenic interest. Though an Imperial Purveyor, he was wholly innocent of business skill and *savoir-faire;* and though, for his father's and grandfather's sake, he was allowed to register at the Ministry and receive regular payments of grain and money, everything else was looked after for him by the clerks and factors of the family business.

Xue Pan's widowed mother was a younger half-sister of Wang Zi-teng, at that time Commandant of the Metropolitan Barracks, and younger sister of Lady Wang, the wife of Jia Zheng of the Rong mansion. She was now around fifty and had only the one son. Besides Xue Pan she had a daughter two years his junior called Bao-chai, a girl of flawless looks and great natural refinement. While her father was still alive she had been his favourite and had been taught to read and write and construe - all of which she did ten times better than her oafish brother; but when he died and her brother proved in-capable of offering their mother any comfort, she laid aside her books and devoted herself to needlework and housewifely duties in order to take some of the burden off her mother's shoulders.

The well-known interest always shown by our present sovereign in literature and the arts, and the widespread recruitment of talent that this has stimulated, had recently, at the time of which we speak, led to an unprecedented act of Imperial grace whereby daughters of hereditary officials and distinguished families, apart from the possibility of being recruited to the Imperial seraglio by the customary procedures, were permitted to have their names sent in to the Ministry for selection as study-companions, with the rank and title of Maid of Honour or Lady-in-waiting, of the Imperial princesses and the daughters of princes of the blood.

This circumstance, coupled with the fact that, since the death of his father, the managers, clerks, and factors of the family business in its various agencies throughout the provinces had profited from Xue Pan's youth and ignorance of affairs to feather their own nests at the firm's expense, and even the family's enterprises in the capital, of which there were several, had shown a gradual falling-off, provided Xue Pan, who had long heard of the rich pleasures of the metropolis and was agog to taste them, with excuses for realizing his cherished ambition, viz:

1.They must go to the capital because he had to present his sister to the Ministry for selection.

2. They must go to the capital to look up their kinsfolk there.

3. They must go to the capital so that he might clear his accounts with the Ministry and take receipt of a new installment of funds.

(Needless to say, the sole substantial reason for going to the capital, Xue Pan's desire to see the sights, was unexpressed.)

Accordingly, their baggage had long been packed and souvenirs of Nanking for their friends and relations in the capital long been selected and a date for their departure long been decided on, when Xue Pan encountered the kidnapper and Ying-lian and, as Ying-lian was an uncommonly attractive slave-girl, resolved to purchase her and make her his concubine.

Then Feng and his servants came to seize the girl and Xue Pan, confident in his superior forces, shouted the command to his attendant roughs which was to have such fatal consequences for poor Feng Yuan.

Entrusting everything to his clansmen and a few old and trusty retainers, he then proceeded to depart according to schedule, in company with his mother and sister, on the long journey to the capital, accounting the charge of manslaughter a mere bagatelle which the expenditure of a certain amount of coin could confidently be expected to resolve.

Of the journey our story gives no record, except to say that on the last day, when they were about to enter the capital, they heard news that Xue Pan's uncle Wang Zi-teng had just been promoted C.-in-C. Northern Provinces with instructions to leave the capital on a tour of frontier inspection. The news secretly delighted Xue Pan.

'Just as I was worrying about Uncle cramping my style when we got to the capital and preventing me from having a really good fling,' he reflected, 'the old boy obligingly gets himself popped out of the way. Fortune is on my side!'

He then proceeded to reason as follows with his mother:

'We ve got several houses in the capital, but it's all of ten years since anyone has been to stay in them, so you can bet that the housekeepers will have let all the rooms out on the sly. We shall have to send someone on ahead to get things straightened out for us.'

'Why ever should we go to any such trouble?' said his mother. 'I thought the main purpose of our coming here in the first place was to see our relations. There must be lots and lots of spare room at your Uncle Wang's and at your Uncle Jia's place. Surely it. would be much more sensible to stay with one of them first? There will be plenty of time to send our people to get a place of our own ready after we are there.'

'But Uncle's just been promoted to the Northern Provinces,' Xue Pan expostulated. 'They will all be making frantic preparations for him to go. What sort of stupid idiots shall we look like if we come scooting along with all our bag and baggage just at the very moment when he wants to leave?'

'Suppose your Uncle Wang *has* been promoted to another place,' said his mother. 'There is still your Uncle Jia. Besides, Uncle Wang and Auntie Jia have for years been sending us letters inviting us to come and stay with them. Now that we are here, even though Uncle Wang is busy getting ready to go, Auntie Jia will probably be only too glad to have us. I'm sure she would be most offended if we were to go rushing off to get our own house ready.

'But I know perfectly well what's in your mind. You think that if we are staying with your uncle or aunt you will be too restricted, and that if we were living in our own place you would be freer to do just as you liked. Very well then. Why don't you go off and choose a house for yourself to live in and let me and your sister go to Auntie's without you? I haven't seen her or the girls for years and years, and I intend to spend a few days with them now we are here.'

Experience taught Xue Pan that his mother was in an obstinate mood and not to be shaken from her purpose, so he resignedly gave orders to the porters to make straight for the Rong mansion.

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Lady Wang had just breathed a sigh of relief on learning that the affair of Xue Pan's manslaughter charge had been retrieved through the good offices of Jia Yu-cun, when the news that her elder brother had been promoted to a frontier post plunged her once more in gloom at the prospect of losing her main source of contact with the members of her own family. Several days passed in despondency, and then suddenly the servants announced that her sister, bringing her son and daughter and all her household with her, had arrived in the capital and was at that very moment outside the gate dismounting from her carriage.

Delightedly she hurried with her women to the entrance of the main reception hall and conducted Aunt Xue

and her party inside. The sudden reunion of the two sisters was, it goes without saying, an affecting one in which joy and sorrow mingled. After an exchange of information about the years of separation, and after they had been taken to see Grandmother Jia and made their reverence to her, and after the gifts of Nanking produce had been presented and everyone had been introduced to everyone else, there was a family party to welcome the new arrivals.

Xue Pan, meanwhile, had paid his respects to Jia Zheng and Jia Lian and been taken to see Jia She and Cousin Zhen. Jia Zheng now sent a servant round to Lady Wang with the following message:

'Your sister is getting on in years and our nephew is very young and seems rather inexperienced and, I fear, quite capable of getting into a scrape again if they are going to live outside. Pear Tree Court in the north-east corner of our property is lying completely unoccupied at the moment and has quite a sizeable amount of room in it. Why not invite your sister and her children to move in there?'

Lady Wang had wanted all along to ask her sister to stay. Grandmother Jia had sent someone round to tell her that she should 'ask Mrs Xue to stay with us here, so that we can all be close to one another.' And Aunt Xue for her own part had been wanting to stay so that some sort of check could be kept on her son. She was sure that if they were to be on their own somewhere else in the city his unbridled nature would precipitate some fresh calamity. She therefore accepted the invitation with alacrity, privately adding the proviso that she could only contemplate a long stay if it was on the under-standing that they were themselves to be responsible for all their expenses. Lady Wang knew that money was no problem to them, so she readily consented, and Aunt Xue and her children proceeded there and then to move into Pear Tree Court.

This Pear Tree Court had been the Duke of Rong-guo's retreat during the last years of his life. Its buildings totalled not much more than ten frames; but though small and charming, it was complete in every respect, with a little reception room in the front and all the usual rooms and offices behind. It had its own outer door on to the street, through which Xue Pan and the menservants could come and go, and another gate in the south-west corner giving on to a passage-way which led into the courtyard east of Lady Wang's compound.

Through this passage-way Aunt Xue would now daily repair, either after dinner or in the evening, to gossip with Grandmother Jia or reminisce with her sister, Lady Wang. Bao-chai for her part spent her time each day in great contentment, reading or playing Go or sewing with Dai-yu and the three girls.

The only dissatisfied member of the party - to begin with, at any rate—was Xue Pan. He had not wanted to stay in the Jia household, fearing that his uncle's control would prevent him from enjoying himself, but what with his mother's obstinacy and the insistence of the Jias themselves, he was obliged to acquiesce in settling there for the time being, contenting himself with sending some of his people to clean up one of their houses outside so that he would be able to move there later on.

But, to his pleasant surprise, he discovered that the young males of the Jia establishment**,** half of whom he was already on familiar terms with before he had been there a month, were of the same idle, extravagant persuasion as himself and thought him a capital fellow and boon companion. And so he found himself meeting them for a drinking-party one day, for theatre-going the next, on a third day perhaps gambling with them or visiting brothels. For there were no limits to the depravity of their pleasures, and Xue Pan, who was bad enough to start with, soon became ten times worse under their expert guidance.

It was not that jia Zheng was a slack disciplinarian, incapable of keeping his house in order; but the clan was so numerous that he simply could not keep an eye on everyone at once. And in any case the nominal head of the family was not Jia Zheng but Cousin Zhen who, as eldest grandson of the senior, Ning-guo branch, had inherited the founder's office and emoluments and was therefore officially in charge of all the clan's affairs.

Besides, Jia Zheng was kept busy with public and private business of his own and, being by nature a quiet, retiring man who attached little importance to mundane affairs**,** tended to use whatever leisure time he had for reading and playing Go.

Then again, the Pear Tree Court was two courtyards away from Jia Zheng's compound and had its own

private door onto the street by which Xue Pan could come and go as he pleased, so that he and his young cronies could enjoy themselves to their heart's content with no one being any the wiser.

Under these agreeable Circumstances Xue Pan gradually abandoned all thought of moving out.

But as to the outcome of these capers: that will be told in a later chapter.

CHAPTER 5

Jia *Bao-yu visits the Land of Illusion*
And the fairy Disenchantment performs the
'Dream of Golden Days'

From the moment Lin Dai-yu entered the Rong mansion, Grandmother Jia's solicitude for her had manifested itself in a hundred different ways. The arrangements made for her meals and accommodation were exactly the same as for Bao-yu. The other three granddaughters, Ying-chun, Tan-chun and Xi-chun, were relegated to a secondary place in the old lady's affections, and the objects of her partiality themselves began to feel an affection for each other which far exceeded what they felt for any of the rest. Sharing each other's company every minute of the day and sleeping in the same room at night, they developed an understanding so intense that it was almost as if they had grown into a single person.

And now suddenly this Xue Bao-chai had appeared on the scene—a young lady who, though very little older than Dai-yu, possessed a grown-up beauty and aplomb in which all agreed Dai-yu was her inferior. Moreover, in contrast to Dai-yu with her alt of lofty self-sufficiency and total obliviousness to all who did not move on the same exalted level as herself, Bao-chai had a generous, accommodating disposition which greatly endeared her to subordinates, so that even the tiniest maid looked on Miss Bao-chai as a familiar friend. Dai-yu could not but feel somewhat put out by this—a fact of which Bao-chai herself, however, was totally unaware.

As for Bao-yu, he was still only a child - a child, moreover, whom nature had endowed with the eccentric obtuseness of a simpleton. Brothers, sisters, cousins, were all one to him. In his relationships with people he made no distinction between one person and another. If his relationship with Dai-yu was exceptional, it was because greater proximity—since she was living with him in his grandmother's quarters—made her more familiar to him than the rest; and greater familiarity bred greater intimacy.

And of course, with greater intimacy came the occasional tiffs and misunderstandings that are usual with people who have a great deal to do with each other.

One day the two of them had fallen out over something Of other and the argument had ended with Dai-yu crying alone in her room and Bao-yu feeling remorsefully that perhaps he had spoken too roughly. Presently he went in to make his peace with her and gradually, very gradually, Dai-yu's equanimity was restored.

The Winter plum in the gardens of the Ning Mansion was now at its best, and this particular day Cousin Zhen's wife, You-shi, had some wine taken into the gardens and came over in person, bringing her son Jia Rong and his young wife with her, to invite Grandmother Jia, Lady Xing and Lady Wang to a flower-viewing party.

Grandmother Jia and the rest went round as soon as they had finished their breakfast. The party was in the All-scents Garden. It began with tea and continued with Wine, and as it was a family gathering confined to the ladies of the Ning and Rong households, nothing particularly worth recording took place.

At one point in the party Bao-yu was overcome with tired-ness and heaviness and expressed a desire to take

an afternoon nap. Grandmother Jia ordered some of the servants to go back to the house with him and get him comfortably settled, adding that they might return with him later when he was rested; but Qin-shi, the little wife of Jia Rong, smilingly proposed an alternative.

'We have got just the room here for Uncle Bao. Leave him to me, Grannie dear! He will be quite safe in my hands.'

She turned to address the nurses and maidservants who were in attendance on Bao-yu.

'Come, my dears! Tell Uncle Bao to follow me.'

Grandmother Jia had always had a high opinion of Qin-shi's trustworthiness—she was such a charming, delightful little creature, the favourite among her great-granddaughters-in-law—and was quite content to leave the arrangements to her.

Qin-shi conducted Bao-yu and his little knot of attendants to an inner room in the main building. As they entered, Bao-yu glanced up and saw a painting hanging above them on the opposite wall. The figures in it were very finely executed. They represented Scholarly Diligence in the person of the Han philosopher Liu Xiang at his book, obligingly illuminated for him by a supernatural being holding a large flaming torch. Bao-yu found the painting—or rather its subject—distasteful. But the pair of mottoes which flanked it proved the last straw:

True learning implies a clear insight into human activities.
Genuine culture involves the skilful manipulation of human relationships.

In vain the elegant beauty and splendid furnishings of the room! Qin-shi was given to understand in no uncertain terms that her uncle Bao-yu wished to be out of it *at once*.

'If this is not good enough for you,' said Qin-shi with a laugh, 'where *are* we going to put you? — unless you would like to have your rest in my bedroom.'

A little smile played over Bao-yu's face and he nodded. The nurses were shocked.

'An uncle sleep in the bedroom of his nephew's wife! Who ever heard of such a thing I'

Qin-shi laughed again.

'He won't misbehave. Good gracious, he's only a little boy! We don't have to worry about that sort of thing yet! You know my little brother who came last month: he's the same age as Uncle Bao, but if you stood them side by side I shouldn't be a bit surprised if he wasn't the taller of the two.'

'Why haven't I seen your brother yet?' Bao-yu demanded. 'Bring him in and let me have a look at him!'

The servants all laughed.

'Bring him in? Why, he's ten or twenty miles away! But I expect you'll meet him one of these days.'

In the course of this exchange the party had made its way to Qin-shi's bedroom. As Bao-yu entered, a subtle whiff of the most delicious perfume assailed his nostrils, making a sweet stickiness inside his drooping eyelids and causing all the joints in his body to dissolve.

'What a lovely smell!'

He repeated the words several times over.

Inside the room there was a painting by Tang Yin entitled 'Spring Slumber' depicting a beautiful woman asleep under a crab-apple tree, whose buds had not yet opened. The painting was flanked on either side by a pair of calligraphic scrolls inscribed with a couplet from the brush of the Song poet Qin Guan:
(on one side)

The coldness of spring has imprisoned the soft buds in a wintry dream;

(on the other side)

The fragrance of wine has intoxicated the beholder with imagined flower-scents.

On a table stood an antique mirror that had once graced the tiring-room of the lascivious empress Wu Ze-tian. Beside it stood the golden platter on which Flying Swallow once danced for her emperor's delight. And on the platter was that very quince which the villainous An Lu-shan threw at beautiful Yang Gui-fei, bruising her plump white breast. At the far end of the room stood the priceless bed on which Princess Shou-yang was sleeping out of doors under the eaves of the Han-zhang Palace when the plum-flower lighted on her forehead and set a new fashion for coloured patches. Over it hung a canopy commissioned by Princess Tong-chang entirely fashioned out of ropes of pearls.

'I like it here,' said Bao-yu happily.

'My room,' said Qin-shi with a proud smile, 'is lit for an immortal to sleep in.' And she unfolded a quilted coverlet, whose silk had been laundered by the fabulous Xi Shi, and arranged the double head-rest that Hong-niang once carried for her amorous mistress,

The nurses now helped Bao-yu into bed and then tiptoed out, leaving him attended only by his four young maids: Aroma, Skybright, Musk, and Ripple. Qin-shi told them to go outside and stop the cats from lighting on the eaves.

As soon as Bao-yu closed his eyes he sank into a confused sleep in which Qin-shi was still there yet at the same time seemed to be drifting along weightlessly in front of him. He followed her until they came to a place of marble terraces and vermilion balustrades where there were **green** trees and crystal streams. Everything in this place was so clean and so pure that it seemed as if no human foot could ever have trodden there or floating speck of dust ever blown into it. Bao-yu's dreaming self rejoiced. 'What a delightful place! he thought. 'If only I could spend all my life here! How much nicer it would be than living under the daily restraint of my parents and teachers!'

These idle reflections were interrupted by someone singing a song on the other side of a hill:

'Spring's dream-time will like
drifting clouds disperse,
Its flowers snatched by a flood
none can reverse.
Then tell each nymph and swain
'Tis folly to invite love's pain!'

It was the voice of a girl. Before its last echoes had died away, a beautiful woman appeared in the quarter from which the voice had come, approaching him with a floating, fluttering motion. She was quite unlike any earthly lady, as the following poem will make clear:

She has left her willow-tree house, from her blossoming bower stepped out;
For the birds betray where she walks through the trees that cluster about,

And a shadow athwart the winding walk announces that she is near,
And a fragrance of musk and orchid from fluttering fairy sleeves,
And a tinkle of girdle-gems that falls on the ear
At each movement of her dress of lotus leaves.
A peach-tree blossoms in her dimpling cheek;
Her cloud-coiled tresses are halcyon-sleek;
And she reveals, through parted cherry lips,
Teeth like pomegranate pips.
Her slim waist's sinuous swaying calls to mind
The dance of snowflakes with the waltzing wind;
Hair ornaments of pearl and halcyon **blue**
Outshine her painted forehead's golden hue.
Her face, through blossoms fleetingly disclosed,
To mirth or ire seems equally disposed;
And as by the waterside she goes,
Hovering on light-stepping toes,
A half-incipient look of pique
Says she would speak, yet would not speak;
While her feet, with the same irresolution,
Would halt, yet would not interrupt their motion.
I contemplate her rate complexion,
Ice-pure and lade-like in perfection;
I marvel at her glittering dress,
Where art lends grace to sumptuousness;
I wonder at her fine-cut featured—
Marble, which fragrance marks as one with living creatures;
And I admire her queenly gait,
Like stately dance of simurgh with his mate.
Her purity I can best show
In plum-trees flowering in the snow;
Her chastity I shall recall
In orchids white at first frost-fall;
Her tranquil nature will prevail,
Constant as lone pine in an empty vale;
Her loveliness as dazzled make
As sunset gilding a pellucid lake;
Her glittering elegance I can compare
With dragons in an ornamental mere;
Her dreamy soulfulness most seems
Like wintry waters in the moon's cold beams.
The beauties of days gone by by her beauty are all abashed.
Where was she born, and from whence descended?

Immortal I judge her, fresh come from fairy feastings by the Jasper Pool,
Or from fluting in starry balls, some heavenly concert ended.

Observing delightedly that the lady was a fairy, Bao-yu hurried forward and saluted her with a smile.

'Madam Fairy, I don't know where you have come from or where you are going to, but as I am quite lost in this place) will you please take me with you and be my guide?'

'I am the fairy Disenchantment,' the fairy woman repelled. 'I live beyond the Realm of Separation, in the Sea Of Sadness. There is a Mountain of Spring Awakening which rises from the midst of that sea, and on that mountain is the Paradise of the Full-blown Flower, and in that paradise is the Land of Illusion, which is my home. My business is with the romantic passions, love-debts, girlish heartbreaks and male philanderings of your dust-stained, human world. The reason I have come here today is that recently there has been a heavy concentration of *love-karma* in this area, and I hope to be able to find an opportunity of distributing a quantity of a amorous thoughts by implanting them in the appropriate breasts. My meeting you here today is no accident but a part of the same project.

'This place where we are now is not so very far from my home. I have not much to offer you, but would you like to come back with me and let me try to entertain you? I have some fairy tea, which I picked myself. You could have a cup of that. And I have a few jars of choice new wine of my own brewing. I have also been rehearsing a fairy choir and a troupe of fairy dancers in a twelve-part suite which I recently composed called "A Dream of Golden Days". I could get them to perform it for you. What do you think?'

Bao-yu was so excited by this invitation that he quite forgot to wonder what had become of Qin-shi in his eagerness to accompany the fairy. As he followed her, a big stone archway suddenly loomed up in front of them on which

THE LAND OF ILLUSION

was Written in large characters. A couplet in smaller characters was inscribed on either side of the arch:

Truth becomes fiction when the fiction's true;
Real becomes not-real when the unreal's real.

Having negotiated the archway, they presently came to the gateway of a palace. The following words were inscribed horizontally above the lintel:

SEAS OF PAIN AND SKIES OF PASSION

whilst the following words were inscribed vertically on the two sides:

Ancient earth and sky
Marvel that love's passion should outlast all time.
Star-crossed men and maids
Groan that love's debts should be so hard to pay.

'I see,' said Bao-yu to himself. 'I wonder what the meaning of "passion that outlasts all time" can be. And

what ate “love’s debts”? From now on I must make an effort to understand these things.’

He could not, of course, have known it, but merely by thinking this he had invited the attentions of the demon Lust, and at that very moment a little of the demon’s evil poison had entered Bao-yu’s body and lodged itself in the innermost recesses of his heart.

Wholly unconscious of his mortal peril, Bao-yu continued to follow the fairy woman. They passed through a second gateway, and Bao-yu saw a range of palace buildings ahead of them on either hand. The entrance to each building had a board above it proclaiming its name, and there were couplets on either side of the doorways. Bao-yu did not have time to read all of the names, but he managed to make out a few, viz:

DEPARTMENT OF FOND INFATUATION
DEPARTMENT OF CRUEL REJECT-ION
DEPARTMENT OF EARLY MORNING WEEPING
DEPARTMENT OP LATE NIGHT SOBBING
DEPARTMENT OF SPRING FEVER
DEPARTMENT OF AUTUMN GRIEF

‘Madam Fairy,’ said Bao-yu, whose interest had been whetted by what he had managed to read, ‘couldn’t you take me inside these offices to have a look around?’

‘In these offices,’ said the fairy woman, ‘are kept registers in which are recorded the past, present and future of girls from all over the world. It is not permitted that your earthly eyes should look on things that are yet to come.’

Bao-yu was most unwilling to accept this answer, and begged and pleaded so persistently that at last Disenchantment gave in.

‘Very well. You may make a very brief inspection of this office here.’

Delighted beyond measure, Bao-yu raised his head and read the notice above the doorway:

DEPARTMENT OP THE ILL-FATED FAIR

The couplet inscribed vertically on either side of the doorway was as follows:

Spring grieves and autumn sorrows were by yourselves provoked.
Flower faces, moonlike beauty were to what end disclosed?

Bao-yu grasped enough of the meaning to be affected by its melancholy.

Passing inside, he saw a dozen or more large cupboards with paper strips pasted on their doors on which were written the names of different provinces. He was careful to look out for the one belonging to his own area and presently found one on which the paper strip said ‘Jinling, Twelve Beauties of; Main Register’. Bao-yu asked Disenchantment what this meant, and she explained that it was a register of the twelve most out-standing girls of his home province.

‘People all say what a big place Jinling is,’ said Bao-yu. ‘Surely there should be more than just twelve names? Why, even in my own home, if you count the servants, there must be altogether several hundred girls.’

‘Certainly there area great many girls in the whole province,’ said Disenchantment with a smile, ‘but only the most important ones have been selected for recording in this register. The registers in the cupboards on either side contain two other selections from the same area. But of the host of ordinary girls outside those three dozen we keep no records.’

Bao-yu glanced at the other two cupboards referred to by Disenchantment. One was labelled ‘Jinling, Twelve Beauties of; Supplementary Register No.1’; the other was labelled ‘Jinling, Twelve Beauties of; Supplementary Register No.2’. Stretching Out his hand he opened the door of the second one, took out Supplementary Register No.2, which was like a large album, and opened it at the first page.

It was a picture, but not of a person or a view.[3] The whole page was covered with dark ink washes representing storm-clouds or fog, followed on the next page by a few lines of verse:

Seldom the moon shines in a cloudless sky,
And days of brightness all too soon pass by.
A noble and aspiring mind
In a base-born frame confined,
Your charm and wit did only hatred gain,
And in the end you were by slanders slain,
Your gentle lord’s solicitude in vain.

Bao-yu could not make much sense of this, and turned to the next page. It was another picture, this time of a bunch of fresh flowers and a worn-out mat, again followed by a few limes of verse.

What price your kindness and compliance,
Of sweetest flower the rich perfume?
You chose the player fortune favoured,
Unmindful of your master’s doom.

Bao-yu was even more mystified by this than by the first page, and laying the album aside, opened the door of the cupboard marked ‘Supplementary Register No. I’ and took out the album from that.

As in the previous album, the first page was a picture. It represented a branch of cassia with a pool underneath. The Water in the pool had dried up and the mud in the bottom was dry and cracked. Growing from it was a withered and broken lotus plant. The picture was followed by these lines:

Your stem grew from a noble lotus toot,
Yet your life passed, poor flower, in low repute.
The day two earths shall bear a single tree,
Your soul must fly home to its own country.

Once more failing to make any sense of what he saw, Bao-yu picked up the Main Register to look at. In this album the picture on the first page represented two dead trees with a
lade belt hanging in their branches and on the ground beneath them a pile of snow in which

[3] See Appendix, p. 527

a golden hairpin lay half-buried. This was followed by a quatrain:

One was a pattern of female virtue,
One a wit who made other wits seem slow.
The jade belt in the **green**wood hangs,
The gold pin is buried beneath the snow.

Still Bao-yu was unable to understand the meaning. He would have liked to ask, but he knew that Disenchantment would be unwilling to divulge the secrets of her immortal world. Yet though he could make no sense of the book, for some reason he found himself unable this time to lay it down, and continued to look through it to the end.

The picture that followed was of a bow with a citron hanging from it, followed by what looked like the words of a song:

You shall, when twenty years in life's hard school are done,
In pomegranate-time to palace halls ascend.
Though three springs never could with your first spring compare,
When hare meets tiger your great dream shall end.

Next was a picture of two people flying a kite. There was also a large expanse of sea with a boat in it and a girl in the boat who had buried her face in her hands and appeared to be crying. This was followed by a quatrain:

Blessed with a shrewd mind and a noble heart,
Yet born in time of twilight and decay,
In spring through tears at river's bank you gaze,
Borne by the wind a thousand miles away.

The next picture showed some scudding wisps of cloud and a stretch of running water followed by these words:

What shall avail you rank and riches,
Orphaned while yet in swaddling bands you lay?
Soon you must mourn your bright sun's early setting.
The Xiang flows and the Chu clouds sail away.

Next was a picture showing a beautiful jade which had fallen into the mud, followed by words of judgement:

For all your would-be spotlessness
And vaunted otherworldliness,
You that look down on common flesh and blood,
Yourself impure, shall end up in the mud.

Next was a striking picture of a savage wolf pursuing a beautiful girl. He had just seized her with his jaws

and appeared to be about to eat her. Underneath it was written:

Paired with a brute like the wolf in the old fable,
Who on his saviour turned when he was able,
To cruelty not used, your gentle heart
Shall, in a twelvemonth only, break apart.

After this was an old temple with a beautiful girl sitting all on her own inside it reading a Buddhist sutra. The words said:

When you see through the spring scene's transient state,
A nun's black habit shall replace your own.
Alas, that daughter of so great a house
By Buddha's altar lamp should sleep alone!

Next was an iceberg with a hen phoenix perched on the top of it, and these words:

This phoenix in a bad time came;
All praised her great ability.
'Two' makes my riddle with a man and tree:
Returning south in tears she met calamity.

Next was a cottage in a deserted village inside which a beautiful girl sat spinning, followed by these words:

When power is lost, rank matters not a lot;
When families fall, kinship must be forgot.
Through a chance kindness to a country wife
Deliverance came for your afflicted life.

This was followed by a picture of a vigorously growing orchid in a pot, beside which stood a lady in full court dress. The words said:

The plum-tree bore her fruit after the rest,
Yet, when all's done, her Orchid was the best.
Against your ice-pure nature all in vain
The tongues of envy wagged; you felt no pain.

The picture after that showed an upper room in a tail building in which a beautiful girl was hanging by her neck from a beam, having apparently taken her own life. The words said:

Love was her sea, her sky; in such excess
Love, meeting with its like, breeds wantonness.
Say not our troubles all from Rong's side came;

For their beginning Ning must take the blame.

Bao-yu would have liked to see some more, but the fairy woman, knowing how intelligent and sharp-witted he was, began to fear that she was in danger of becoming responsible for a leakage of celestial secrets, and so, snapping the album shut, she said with a laugh, 'Come with me and we will do some more sight-seeing. Why stay here puzzling your head over these silly riddles?'

Next moment, without quite knowing how it happened, Bao-yu found that he had left the place of registers behind him and was following Disenchantment through the rear parts of the palace. Everywhere there were buildings with ornately carved and painted eaves and rafters, their doorways curtained with strings of pearls and their interiors draped with embroidered hangings. The courtyards outside them were full of deliciously fragrant fairy blooms and rare aromatic herbs.

Gleam of gold pavement flashed on **scarlet** doors,
And in jade walls jewelled casements snow white shone.

'Hurry, hurry! Come out and welcome the honoured guest!' he heard Disenchantment calling to someone inside, and almost at once a bevy of fairy maidens came running from the palace, lotus-sleeves fluttering and feather-skirts billowing, each as enchantingly beautiful as the flowers of spring or the autumn moon. Seeing Bao-yu, they began to reproach Disenchantment angrily.

'So this is your "honoured guest"! What do you mean by making us hurry out to meet *him?* You told us that today at this very hour the dream-soul of our darling **Crimson** Pearl was coming to play with us, and we have been waiting I don't know how long for her arrival. And now, instead, you have brought this disgusting creature to pollute our pure, maidenly precincts. What's the idea ?'

At these words Bao-yu was suddenly overwhelmed with a sense of the uncleanness and impurity of his own body and sought in vain for somewhere to escape to; but Disenchantment held him by the hand and advanced towards the fairy maidens with a conciliatory smile.

'Let me tell you the reason for my change of plan. It is true that I set off for the Rong mansion with the intention of fetching **Crimson** Pearl, but as I was passing through the Ning mansion on my way, I happened to run into the Duke of Ning-guo and his brother the Duke of Rong-guo and they laid a solemn charge on me which I found it hard to refuse.

'"In the hundred years since the foundation of the present dynasty," they said, "several generations of our house have distinguished themselves by their services to the Throne and have covered themselves with riches and honours; but now its stock of good fortune has run out, and nothing can be done to replenish it. And though our descendants are many, not one of them is worthy to carry on the line. The only possible exception, our great-grandson Bao-yu, has inherited a perverse, intractable nature and is eccentric and emotionally unstable; and although his natural brightness and intelligence augur well, we fear that owing to the fated eclipse of our family's fortunes there will be no one at hand to give the lad proper guidance and to start him off along the right lines.

'"May we profit from the fortunate accident of this encounter, Madam, to entreat you to take the boy in hand for us? Could you perhaps initiate him in the pleasures of the flesh and all that sort of thing in such a way as to shock the silliness out of him? In that way he might stand a chance of escaping some of the traps that people fall into and be able to devote himself single-mindedly to the serious things of life. It would be such a kindness if you would do this for us."

‘Hearing the old gentlemen so earnest in their entreaty, I was moved to compassion and agreed to bring the boy here. I began by letting him have a good look at the records of the three grades of girls belonging to his own household; but the experience did not bring any awareness; and so I have brought him to this place for another attempt. It is my hope that a full exposure to the illusions of feasting, drinking, music and dancing may succeed in bringing about an awakening in him some time in the future.’

Having concluded her explanation, she led Bao-yu indoors. At once he became aware of a faint, subtle scent, the source of which he was quite unable to identify and about which he felt im$_{1)}$elled to question Disenchantment.

‘How could you possibly know what it was,’ said Disenchantment with a somewhat scornful smile, ‘since this perfume is not to be found anywhere in your mortal world? It is made from the essences of rare plants found on famous mountains and other places of great natural beauty, culled when they are new-grown and blended with gums from the peari4aden trees that grow in the jewelled groves of paradise. It is called *“Belles Se Fanent”.’*

Bao-yu expressed his admiration.

The company now seated themselves, and some little maids served them with tea. Bao-yu found its fragrance fresh and clean and its flavour delicious, totally unlike those of any earthly blend he knew. He asked Disenchantment for the name.

‘The leaves are picked in the Paradise of the Full-blown Flower on the Mountain of Spring Awakening,’ Disenchantment informed him. ‘It is infused in water collected from the dew that lies on fairy flowers and leaves. The name is “Maiden’s Tears”.’

Bao-yu nodded attentively and commended the tea.

Looking around the room he noticed various musical instruments, antique bronzes, paintings by old masters, poems by new poets, and other hallmarks of gracious living. He was particularly delighted to observe some rouge-stained pieces of cotton-wool lying on the window-sill—evidently the aftermath of some fairy-woman’s toilet. A pair of calligraphic scrolls hung on the wall, making up the following couplet:

Earth’s choicest spirits in the dark lie hid:
Heaven ineluctably enforced their fate.

After reading the scrolls, Bao-yu asked to be introduced to the fairy maidens. They had a strange assortment of names. One was called Dream-of-bliss, another was called Loving-heart, a third Ask-for-trouble, a fourth Past-regrets, and the rest all had names that were equally bizarre.

Presently the little maids came in again and proceeded to arrange some chairs around a table and to lay it with food and wine for a feast. In the words of the poet,

Celestial nectar filled the crystal cup,
And liquid gold in amber goblets glowed.

The wine’s bouquet was delectable, and once again Bao-yu could not resist asking about it.

‘This wine,’ said Disenchantment, ‘is made from the petals of hundreds of different kinds of flowers and extracts from thousands of different sorts of trees. These are blended and fermented with kylin’s marrow and phoenix milk. Hence its name, *“Lachrymae Rerum”’*

Bao-yu praised it enthusiastically.

As they sat drinking wine, a troupe of twelve dancers entered and inquired what pieces they should perform for the company’s entertainment.

‘You can do the twelve songs of my new song-and-dance suite “A Dream of Golden Days”,’ said Disenchantment.

At once the sandalwood clappers began, very softly, to beat out a rhythm, accompanied by the sedate twang of the *Zheng’s* silver strings and by the voice of a singer.

‘When first the world from chaos rose…’

The singer had got no further than the first line of the first song when Disenchantment interrupted.

‘This suite,’ she told Bao-yu, ‘is not like the music-dramas of your earthly composers in which there are always the fixed parts Of *sheng, dan, jing, mo* and so on, and set tunes in the various Northern and Southern modes. In my suite each song is an elegy on a single person or event and the tunes are original compositions which we have orchestrated ourselves. You need to know what the songs are about in order to appreciate them properly. I should not imagine you are very familiar with this sort of entertainment; so unless you read the libretto of the songs first before listening to them, I fear you may find them rather insipid.’

Turning to one of the maids, she ordered her to fetch the manuscript of her libretto of ‘A Dream of Golden Days’ and gave it to Bao-yu to read, so that he could listen to the songs with one eye on the text. These were the words in Disenchantment’s manuscript:

Prelude: *A Dream of Go/den Days*[4]

When first the world from chaos rose,
Tell me, how did love begin?
The wind and moonlight first did love compose.
Now woebegone
And quite cast down
In low estate
I would my foolish heart expose,
And so perform
This *Dream of Golden Days,*
And all my grief for my lost loves disclose.

First Song: *The Mistaken Marriage*

Let others all
Commend the marriage rites of gold and jade;
I still recall
The bond of old by stone and flower made;
And while my vacant eyes behold
Crystalline snows of beauty pure and cold,
From my mind can not be banished
That fairy wood forlorn that from the world has vanished.

[4] See Appendix, p.528

How true I find
That every good some imperfection bolds!
Even a wife so courteous and so kind
No comfort' brings to my afflicted mind.

Second Song: *Hope Betrayed*

One was a flower from paradise,
One a pure jade without spot or stain.
If each for the other one was not intended,
Then why in this life did they meet again?
And yet if fate bad meant them for each other,
Why was their earthly meeting all in vain?
In vain were all her sighs and tears,
In vain were all his anxious fears:
All, insubstantial, doomed to pass,
As moonlight mirrored in the water
Or flowers reflected in a glass.
Row many tears from those poor eyes could flow,
Which every season rained upon her woe?

Third Song: *Mutability*,

In the full flower of her prosperity
Once more came mortal mutability,
Bidding her, with both eyes wide,
All earthly things to cast aside,
And her sweet soul upon the airs to glide.
So far the road back home did seem
That to her parents in a dream
Thus she her final duty paid:
'I that now am but a shade,
Parents dear,
For your happiness I fear:
Do not tempt the hand of fate!
Draw back, draw back, before it is too late!'

Fourth Song: *From Dear Ones Parted*

Sail, boat, a thousand miles through rain and wind,
Leaving my home and dear ones far behind.
I fear that my remaining years

Will waste away in homesick tears.
Father dear and mother mild,
Be not troubled for your child!
From of old our rising, falling
Was ordained; so now this parting.
Each in another land must be;
Each for himself must fend as best he may;
Now I am gone, oh. do not weep for me!

Fifth Song: *Grief Amidst Gladness*

While you still in cradle lay,
Both your parents passed away.
Though born to silken luxury,
No warmth or kind indulgence came your way.
Yet yours was a generous, open-hearted nature,
And never could be snared or soured
By childish piques and envious passions—
You were a crystal house by wind and moonlight scoured.
Matched to a perfect, gentle husband,
Security of bliss at last it seemed,
And all your childish miseries redeemed.
But soon alas.! the clouds of Gao4ang faded,
The waters of the Xiang ran dry.
In our grey world so are things always ordered:
What then avails it to lament and sigh?

Sixth Song: *All at Odds*

Heaven made you like a flower,
With grace and wit to match the gods,
Adding a strange, contrary nature
That set you with the test at odds.
Nauseous to you the world's rank diet,
Vulgar its fashion's gaudy dress:
But the world envies the superior
And hates a too precious daintiness.
Sad it seemed that your life should in dim-lit shrines be wasted,
All the sweets of spring untasted:
Yet, at the last,
Down into mud and shame your hopes were cast,

Like a white, flawless jade dropped in the muck,
Where only wealthy rakes might bless their luck.

Seventh Song: *Husband and Enemy*

Zhong-shan wolf,
Inhuman sot,
Who for past kindnesses cared not a jot!
Bully and spendthrift, reckless in debauch,
For riot or for whoring always hot!
A delicate young wife of gentle stock
To you was no more than a lifeless block,
And bore, when you would rant and rave,
Treatment fat worse than any slave;
So that her delicate, sweet soul
In just a twelvemonth from its body stole.

Eighth Song: *The Vanity of Spring*

When triple spring as vanity was seen,
What use the blushing flowers, the willows **green**?
From youth's extravagance you sought release
To win chaste quietness and heavenly peace.
The hymeneal peach-blooms in the sky,
The flowering almond's blossoms seen on high
Dismiss, since none, for sure,
Can autumn's blighting frost endure.
Amidst sad aspens mourners sob and sigh,
In maple woods the poor ghosts thinly cry,
And under the dead grasslands lost graves lie.
Now poor, now rich, men's lives in toil are passed
To be, like summer's pride, cut down at last.
The doors of life and death all must go through.
Yet this I know is true:
In Paradise there grows a precious tree
Which bears the fruit of immortality.

Ninth Song: *Caught By Her Own Cunning*

Too shrewd by half, with such finesse you wrought
That your own life in your own toils was caught;

But long before you died your heart was slain,
And when you died your spirit walked in vain.
Fall'n the great house once so secure in wealth,
Each scattered member shifting for himself;
And half a life-time's anxious schemes
Proved no more than the stuff of dreams.
Like a great building's tottering crash,
Like flickering lampwick burned to ash,
Your scene of happiness concludes in grief:
For worldly bliss is always insecure and brief.

Tenth Song: *The Survivor*

Some good remained,
Some good remained:
    The daughter found a friend in need
Through her mother's one good deed.
    So let all men the poor and meek sustain,
And from the example of her cruel kin refrain,
Who kinship scorned and only thought of gain.
    For far above the constellations
One watches all and makes just calculations.

Eleventh Song: *Splendour Come Late*

Favour, a shadow in the glass;
Fame, a dream that soon would pass:
    The blissful flowering-time of youth soon fled,
Soon, too, the pleasures of the bridal bed.
    A pearl-encrusted crown and robes of state
Could not for death untimely compensate;
    And though each man desires
    Old age from want made free,
    True blessedness requires
    A clutch of young heirs at the knee.
    Proudly upright
    The head with cap and hands of office on,
    And gleaming bright
    Upon his breast the gold insignia shone.
    An awesome sight
    To see him so exalted stand! -Yet the black night
    Of death's dark frontier lay close at hand.

All those whom history calls great
Left only empty names for us to venerate.

Twelfth Song: *The Good Things Have An End*

Perfumed was the dust that fell
From painted beams where springtime ended.
Her sportive heart
And amorous looks
The ruin of a mighty house portended.
The weakness in the line began with Jing;
The blame for the decline lay first in Ning;
But retribution all was of Love's fashioning.

Epilogue: *The Birds Into The Wood Have Flown*

The office jack's career is blighted,
The rich man's fortune now all vanished,
The kind with life have been requited,
The cruel exemplarily punished;
The one who owed a life is dead,
The tears one owed have all been shed.
Wrongs suffered have the wrongs done expiated;
The couplings and the sunderings were fated.
Untimely death sin in some past life shows,
But only luck a blest old age bestows.
The disillusioned to their convents fly,
The still deluded miserably die.
Like birds who, having fed, to the woods repair,
They leave the landscape desolate and bare.

Having reached the end of this suite, the singers showed signs of embarking on another one. Disenchantment observed with a sigh that Bao-yu was dreadfully bored.

'Silly boy! You still don't understand, do you?,

Bao-yu hurriedly stopped the girls and told them that they need not sing any more. He felt dizzy and his head was spinning. He explained to Disenchantment that he had drunk too much and would like to lie down.

At once she ordered the remains of the feast to be removed and conducted Bao-yu to a dainty bedroom. The furnishings and hangings of the bed were more sumptuous and beautiful than anything he had ever seen. To his intense surprise there was a fairy girl sitting in the middle of it. Her rose-fresh beauty reminded him strongly of Bao-chai, but there was also something about her of Dai-yu's delicate charm. As he was pondering the meaning of this apparition, he suddenly became aware that Disenchantment was addressing him.

‘In the rich and noble households of your mortal world, too many of those bowers and boudoirs where innocent tenderness and sweet girlish fantasy should reign are injuriously defiled by coarse young voluptuaries and loose, wanton girls. And what is even more detestable, there are always any number of worthless philanderers to protest that it is woman’s beauty alone that inspires them, or loving feelings alone, unsullied by any taint of lust. They lie in their teeth! To be moved by woman’s beauty is itself a kind of lust. To experience loving feelings is, even more assuredly, a kind of lust. Every act of love, every carnal congress of the sexes is brought about precisely because sensual delight in beauty has kindled the feeling of love.

‘The reason I like you so much is because you are full of lust. You are the most lustful person I have ever known in the whole world 1’

Bao-yu was scared by the vehemence of her words.

‘Madam Fairy, you are wrong! Because I am lazy over my lessons, Mother and Father still have to scold me quite often; but surely that doesn’t make me *lustful?* I’m still too young to know what they do, the people they use that word about.’

‘Ah, but you *are* lustful!’ said Disenchantment. ‘In principle, of course, all lust is the same. But the word has many different meanings. For example, the typically lustful man in the common sense of the word is a man who likes a pretty face, who is fond of singing and dancing, who is inordinately given to flirtation; one who makes love in season and out of season, and who, if he could, would like to have every pretty girl in the world at his disposal, to gratify his desires whenever he felt like it. Such a person is a mere brute. His is a shallow, promiscuous kind of lust.

‘But your kind of lust is different. That blind, defenceless love with which nature has filled your being is what we call here “lust of the mind”. “Lust of the mind” cannot be explained in words, nor, if it could, would you be able to grasp their meaning. Either you know what it means or you don’t.

‘Because of this “lust of the mind” women will find you a kind and understanding friend; but in the eyes of the world I am afraid it is going to make you seem unpractical and eccentric. It is going to earn you the jeers of many and the angry looks of many more.

‘Today I received a most touching request on your behalf from your ancestors the Duke of Ning-guo and the Duke of Rong-guo. And as I cannot bear the idea of your being rejected by the world for the greater glory of us women, I have brought you here. I have made you drunk with fairy wine. I have drenched you with fairy tea. I have admonished you with fairy songs. And now I am going to give you my little sister Two-in-one—”Ke-qing” to her friends—to be your bride.

‘The time is propitious. You may consummate the marriage this very night. My motive in arranging this is to help you grasp the fact that, ‘since even in these immortal precincts love is an illusion, the love of your dust-stained, mortal world must be doubly an illusion. It is my earnest hope that, knowing this, you will henceforth be able to shake yourself free of its entanglements and change your previous way of thinking, devoting your mind seriously to the teachings of Confucius and Mencius and your person wholeheartedly to the betterment of society.’

Disenchantment then proceeded to give him secret instructions in the art of love; then, pushing him gently inside the room, she closed the door after him and went away.

Dazed and confused, Bao-yu nevertheless proceeded to follow out the instructions that Disenchantment had given him, which led him by predictable stages to that act which boys and girls perform together and which it is not my intention to give a full account of here.

Next morning he lay for a long time locked in blissful tenderness with Ke-qing, murmuring sweet

endearments in her ear and unable to tear himself away from her. Eventually they emerged from the bedroom hand in hand to walk together out-of-doors.

Their walk seemed to take them quite suddenly to a place where only thorn-trees grew and wolves and tigers prowled around in pairs. Ahead of them the road ended at the edge of a dark ravine. No bridge connected it with the other side. As they hesitated, wondering what to do, they suddenly became aware that Disenchantment was running up behind them.

'Stop! Stop!' she was shouting. 'Turn back at once! Turn back!'

Bao-yu stood still in alarm and asked her what place this was.

'This is the Ford of Error,' said Disenchantment. 'It is ten thousand fathoms deep and extends hundreds of miles in either direction. No boat can ever cross it; only a raft manned by a lay-brother called Numb and an acolyte called Dumb. Numb holds the steering-paddle and Dumb wields the pole. They won't ferry anyone across for money, but only take those who are fated to cross over.

'If you had gone on walking just now and had fallen in, all the good advice I was at such pains to give you would have been wasted!'

Even as she spoke there was a rumbling like thunder from inside the abyss and a multitude of demons and water monsters reached up and clutched at Bao-yu to drag him down into its depths. In his terror the sweat broke out over his body like rain and a great cry burst from his lips, 'Ke-qing! Save me!'

Aroma and his other maids rushed upstairs in alarm and clung to him.

Don't be frightened, Bao-yu! We are here!'

But Qin-shi, who was out in the courtyard telling the maids to be sure that the cats and dogs didn't fight, marvelled to hear him call her name out in his sleep.

'"Ke-qing" was the name they called me back at home when I was a little girl. Nobody here knows it. I wonder how he could have found it out?'

If you have not yet fathomed the answer to her question, you must read the next chapter.

CHAPTER *6*

Jia Bao-yu conducts his first experiment
in the Art of Love
And Grannie Liu makes her first entry into the
Rong-guo mansion

Qin-shi was surprised to hear Bao-yu call out her childhood name in his sleep, but did not like to pursue the matter. As she stood wondering, Bao-yu, who was still bemused after his dream and not yet in full possession of his faculties, got out of bed and began to stretch himself and to adjust his clothes, assisted by Aroma. As she was doing up his trousers, her hand, chancing to stray over his thigh, came into contact with some-thing cold and sticky which caused her to draw it back in alarm and ask him if he was all right. Instead of answering, he merely reddened and gave the hand a squeeze.

Aroma had always been an intelligent girl. She was, in any case, a year or two older than Bao-yu and had recently begun to have some understanding of the facts of life. Observing the condition that Bao-yu was in, she therefore had more than an inkling of what had happened. Abandoning her question, she busied herself with his

clothes, her cheeks suffused by a **crimson** blush of embarrassment. When he was properly dressed, they went to rejoin Grandmother Jia and the rest. There they bolted a hurried supper and then slipped back to the other house, where Aroma profited from the absence of the nurses and the other maids to take out a clean undergarment for Bao-yu to change into.

'Please, Aroma,' Bao-yu shamefacedly entreated as she helped him change, '*please* don't tell anyone I'
Equally ill at ease, Aroma giggled softly.

'Why did you... ?' she began to ask. Then, after glancing cautiously around, began again.
'Where did that stuff come from?'

Bao-yu blushed furiously and said nothing. Aroma stared at him curiously and continued to giggle. After much hesitation he proceeded to give her a detailed account of his dream. But when he came to the part of it in which he made love to Two-in-one, Aroma threw herself forward with a shriek of laughter and buried her face in her hands.

Bao-yu had long been attracted by Aroma's somewhat coquettish charms and tugged at her purposefully, anxious to share with her the lesson he had learned from Disenchantment. Aroma knew that when Grandmother Jia gave her to Bao-yu she had intended her to belong to him in the fullest possible sense, and so, having no good reason for refusing him, she allowed him, after a certain amount of coy resistance, to have his way with her.

From then on Bao-yu treated Aroma with even greater consideration than before, whilst Aroma for her part redoubled the devotion with which she served him. But of this, for the time being, no more.

*

The inhabitants of the Rong mansion, if we include all of them from the highest to the humblest in our total, numbered more than three hundred souls, who produced between them a dozen or more incidents in a single day. Faced with so exuberant an abundance of material, what principle should your chronicler adopt to guide him in his selection of incidents to record? As we pondered the problem *where to begin*, it was suddenly solved for us by the appearance as it were out of nowhere of someone from a very humble, very insignificant household who, on the strength of a very tenuous, very remote family connection with the Jias, turned up at the Rong mansion on the very day of which we are about to write.

Their name was Wang and they were natives of these parts. A grandfather had held some very small official post in the capital and had there become acquainted with Wang xi4eng's grandfather, the father of Lady Wang. Conceiving an admiration for the power and prestige of this greater namesake, he had sought to link his family with the latter's clan by becoming his adoptive nephew. Only Lady Wang and her elder brother—Wang Xi-feng's father—who chanced at that time to be staying with their parent on his tour of duty at the capital, knew anything about this. The other members of the clan were unaware that any such relationship existed.

The grandfather had long since died, leaving an only son called Wang Cheng who, having fallen on hard times, had moved back into the countryside somewhere outside the capital. Wang Cheng in his turn had died leaving a son called Gou-er, who had married a girl from a family called Lin and now had two children, a son called Ban-er and a daughter called Qing-er. The four of them depended on agriculture for their living, and since, with Gou-er himself busy most of the day on the land and his wife busy about the farm drawing water, pounding grain, and the like, there was no one to look after Qing-er and her little brother, Gou-er invited his motherin4aw, old Grannie Lin, to come and live with them.

This Grannie Lin was an ancient widow-woman, rich in experience of the world, who, having no son or

daughter-in-law to cherish her, eked out her solitary existence by scratching a livelihood from a miserable half-acre of land. She therefore embraced her son-in-law's invitation with alacrity and threw herself enthusiastically into the business of helping the young couple to make a living.

The season was now at the turn between autumn and winter. The cold weather was beginning, but none of the preparations for winter had yet been made. By drinking to allay his anxiety, Gou-er merely put himself more out of temper. He returned home to vent some of his spleen on his long-suffering wife. Grannie Liu could eventually stomach no more of his wife-baiting and intervened on her daughter's behalf.

'Now look here, son4n4aw: probably you will think me an interfering old woman; but we country folk have to be grateful for what is in the pot and cut down our appetites to the same measure. When you were little your Ma and Pa could afford to indulge you; so now you're grown-up you spend all your money as soon as you've got any, without stopping to count the cost; then, when it's all gone, you start making a fuss. But what sort of way is that for a grown man to behave?

'Now where we live may be out in the country, but it's still "in the Emperor's shadow", as they say. Over there in the city the streets are paved with money just waiting for some-one to go and pick it up. What's the sense in rampaging around here at home when you could go out and help yourself?'

'It's easy for you to sit on your backside and talk,' said Gou-er rudely, 'but what do you expect me to do? Go out and rob?'

'No one's asking you to rob,' said Grannie Liu. 'But can't we all sit down peaceably and think of a way? Because if we don't, the money isn't going to come walking in the door of its own accord.'

Gou-er snorted sarcastically. £If there were a way, do you suppose I should have waited till now before trying it Out? There are no tax-collectors in my family and no mandarins among my friends. What way *could* there be of laying my hands on some money? Even if I did have rich friends or relations, I'm not so sure they would want to be bothered with the likes of us.'

'I wouldn't say that,' said Grannie Liu. 'Man proposes, God disposes. It's up to us to think of something. We must leave it to the good Lord to decide whether He'll help us or not. Who knows, He might give us the opportunity we are looking for.

'Now I can think of a chance you might try. Your family used to be connected with the Wang clan of Nanking. Twenty years ago the Nanking Wangs used to be very good to you folk. It's only because of late years you have been too stiff-necked to approach them that they have become more distant with you.

'I can remember going to their house once with my daughter. The elder Miss Wang was a very straightforward young lady, very easy to get on with, and not at all high and mighty. She's now the wife of the younger of the two Sir Jias in the Rong mansion. They say that now she's getting on in years she's grown even more charitable and given to good works than she was as a girl. Her brother has been promoted; but I shouldn't be surprised if she at least didn't still remember us. Why don't you try your luck with *her?* You never know, she might do something for you for the sake of old times. She only has to feel well disposed and a hair off her arm would be thicker than a man's waist to poor folks like us',

> 'That's all very well, Mother,' put in Gou-er's wife, 'but just take a look at us! What sort of state are we in to go calling on great folks like them? I doubt the people at the door would bother to tell them we were there. Who's going to all that trouble just to make a fool of themselves?'
>
> Gou-er's cupidity, however, had been aroused by the words of his mother-in-law, and his reaction to them was less discouraging than his wife's.
>
> 'Well, if it's as you say, Grannie, and being as you've already seen this lady, why not go there

yourself and spy out the land for us?'

'Bless us and save us!' said Grannie Lin. 'You know what they say: "A prince's door is like the deep sea." What sort of creature do you take me for? The servants there don't know me; it would be a journey wasted.'

'That's no problem,' said Gou-er. 'I'll tell you what to do. You take young Ban-er with you and ask for Old Zhou that stayed in service with your lady after she married. If you tell them you've come to see him, it will give you an excuse for the visit Old Zhou once entrusted a *bit* of business to my father. He used to be very friendly with us at one time.'

'I knew all about that,' said Grannie Liu. 'But it's a long time since you had anything to do with him and hard to say how he may prove after all these years. Howsomever. Being a man, you naturally can't go in your present pickle; and a young married woman like my daughter can't go gallivanting around the countryside showing herself to everybody. But as my old face is tough enough to stand a slap or two, it's up to me to go. So be it, then. If any good does come of the visit, we shall all of us benefit.'

And so, that very evening, the matter was settled.

Next day Grannie Liu was up before dawn. As soon as she had washed and done her hair, she set about teaching Ban-er a few words to say to the ladies at the great house—an exercise to which he submitted cheerfully enough, as would any little boy of four or five who had been promised an outing to the great city. That done, she set off on her journey, and in due course made her way to Two Dukes Street. There, at each side of the stone lions which flanked the gates of the Rong Mansion, she saw a cluster of horses and palanquins. Not daring to go straight up, she first dusted down her clothes and rehearsed Ban-er's little repertoire of phrases before sidling up to one of the side entrances.

A number of important-looking gentlemen sat in the gateway sunning their bellies and discoursing with animated gestures on a wide variety of topics. Grannie Liu waddled up to them and offered a respectful salutation. After looking her up and down for a moment or two, they asked her her business. Grannie Liu smiled ingratiatingly.

'I've come to see Old Zhou that used to be in service with Her Ladyship before she married. Could I trouble one of you gentlemen to fetch him out for me?'

The gentlemen ignored her request and returned to their discussion. After she had waited there for some considerable time one of them said, 'If you stand at that gate along there on the corner, someone from inside the house should be coming out presently.'

But a more elderly man among them protested that it was 'a shame to send her on a fool's errand', and turning to Grannie Liu he said, 'Old Zhou is away in the South at the moment, but his missus is still at home. She lives round at the back. You'll have to go from here round to the back gate in the other street and ask for her there.'

Grannie Liu thanked him and trotted off with little Ban-er all the way round to the rear entrance. There she found a number of sweetmeat vendors and toy-sellers who had set their wares down outside the gate and were being besieged by a crowd of some twenty or thirty noisy, yelling children. She grabbed a small urchin from their midst and drew him towards her.

'Tell me, sonny, is there a Mrs Zhou living here?'

The urchin stared back at her impudently.

‘Which Mrs Zhou? There are several Mrs Zhous here. What’s her job?’

‘She’s the Mrs Zhou that came here with Her Ladyship when she was married.’

‘That’s easy,’ said the urchin. ‘Follow me!’

He led Grannie Lin into a rear courtyard. ‘That’s where she lives,’ he said, pointing in the direction of a side wall. Then, bawling over the wall, ‘Mrs Zhou, there’s an old woman come to see you”

Zhou Rui’s wife came hurrying out and asked who it was. ‘How are you, my dear?’ said Grannie Liu, advancing with a smile. Zhou Rui’s wife scrutinized her questioningly for some moments before finally recognizing her.

‘Why, it’s Grannie Liu! How are you? It’s so many years since I saw you last, I’d forgotten all about you! Come in and sit down!’

Grannie Liu followed her cackling.

‘You know what they say: “Important people have short memories.” I wouldn’t expect you to remember the likes of us!’

When they were indoors, Zhou Rui’s wife ordered her little hired help to pour out some tea.

‘And hasn’t Ban-er grown a big boy!’ said Zhou Rui’s wife; then, after a few inquiries about the various things that had happened since they last met, she asked Grannie Liu about her visit.

‘Were you just passing by, or have you come specially?’

‘Well, of course, first and foremost we came to see you, replied Grannie Liu mendaciously, ‘but we were also hoping to pay our respects to Her Ladyship. If you could take us to sec her, that would be very nice; but if that’s not possible, perhaps we could trouble you just to give her our regards.’

From the tone of this reply Zhou Rui’s wife was already able to make a pretty good guess as to the real purpose of the old woman’s visit; but because some years previously her husband had received a lot of help from Gou-er’s father in a dispute over the purchase of some land, she could not very well reject Grannie Iiu now, when she came to her as a suppliant. She was, in any case, anxious to demonstrate her own importance in the Jia household; and so the answer she gave her was a gracious one.

‘Don’t you worry, Grannie! After you’ve made such a long pilgrimage, we won’t let you go home without seeing a real Buddha! By rights, of course, Callers and Visitors has nothing to do with me. You see, we each have our own jobs here. My man’s is collecting the half-yearly rents in the spring and autumn; and when he’s not doing that, he takes the young masters Out when they go on visits. That’s all he ever does. Now my job is to attend to their ladyships and the young mistresses when *they* go out. But being as how you are a relation of Her ladyship, and since you’ve put your confidence in me and turned to me to help you, I don’t mind breaking the rules for once and taking in a message.

‘There’s only one thing, though. I don’t expect you know, but things here are very different from what they were five years ago. Nowadays Her Ladyship doesn’t run things here any longer. It’s Master Lian’s wife who does all the managing—You’ll never guess who that is: Her Ladyship’s niece Wang Xi-feng. You know, Her Ladyship’s eldest brothers daughter, that we used to call “Feng-ge” when she was a child’

‘Bless you, my dear, for being such a help!’ said Grannie Liu.

‘Oh Grannie, how can you say such a thing?’ said Zhou Rui’s wife demurely. ‘You know what the old saying is, “He who helps others helps himself.” It’s only a question of saying a few words. No trouble at all.’

So saying, she instructed the little maid to slip quietly round to the back of old Lady Jia’s quarters and ask if they were serving lunch yet. ~he little maid departed on her errand and the two women resumed their conversation.

‘This Mrs Lian,’ said Grannie Liu: ‘she can’t be more than eighteen or nineteen years old. She must be a very capable young woman. Fancy her being able to run a great household like this!’

‘Oh Grannie, you have no idea!’ said Zhou Rui’s wife. ‘Mrs Lian may be young, but when it comes to doing things, she’s got an older head on her shoulders than any *I’ve* ever come across. She’s grown up to be a real beauty too, has Mrs Lian. But sharp! Well, if it ever comes to a slanging match, she can talk down ten grown men any day of the week! Wait till you meet her, and you’ll see what I mean. There’s only one thing) though. She’s a bit too strict with those beneath her.’

As she was speaking, the little maid came back) her errand completed.

‘They’ve finished serving lunch at Her Old Ladyship’s. Mrs Lian is still there.’

Thou Rui’s wife hurriedly rose to her feet and urged Grannie Liu to do likewise.

‘Quick! After she comes out from there she’ll be free for a few minutes while she has her meal. We must try and catch her then. If we delay a moment longer, people will start coming in with messages and we shan’t have a chance to speak to her. And once she goes off for her afternoon nap, we’ve really lost her!’

Grannie Liu got off the kang, adjusted her clothing, conducted Ban-er through a rapid revision of his little stock of phrases and followed Thou Rui’s wife through various twists and turns to Jia Lian’s quarters. Just before they reached them, Thou Rui’s wife planted them both in a covered passage-way while she went on ahead round the screen wall and into the gate of the courtyard. First ascertaining that Wang Xi-feng had not yet left Lady Jia’s, she sought out Xi-feng’s chamber-maid and principal confidante, Patience, and primed her with a full account of Grannie Liu’s antecedents.

‘She has come all this way today to pay her respects,’ she concluded. ‘At one time Her Ladyship used to see quite a lot of her, which is why I thought it would be in order for me to bring her in. I thought I would wait for the young mistress to come back and explain it all to her. I hope she won’t be angry with me for pushing myself forward.’

Patience at once made up her mind what to do.

‘Let them come in here. They can sit here while they are waiting.’

Thou Rui’s wife went off again to fetch her charges. As they ascended the steps to the main reception room, a little maid lifted up the **red** carpet which served as a portiere for them to enter. A strange, delicious fragrance seemed to reach forward and enfold them as they entered, producing in Grannie Liu the momentary sensation that she had been transported bodily to one of the celestial paradises. Their eyes, too, were dazzled by the bright and glittering things that filled the room. Temporarily speechless with wonder, Grannie Liu stood wagging her head, alternating clicks of admiration with pious ejaculations.

From the glittering reception room they passed to a room on the east side of it in which Jia Lian’s baby daughter slept. Patience, who was standing by the edge of the kang, made a rapid assessment of Grannie Liu and judged it sufficient to greet her with a civil ‘how-do-you-do’ and an invitation to be seated.

Grannie Liu looked at the silks and satins in which Patience was dressed, the gold and silver ornaments in her hair, her beauty of feature which in every respect corresponded with what she had been told of Wang Xi-feng, and taking the maid for the mistress, was on the point of greeting her as ‘Gou-er’s aunt ,when Thou Rui’s wife introduced her as ‘Miss Patience. Then, when Patience shortly afterwards addressed Thou Rui’s wife as ‘Mrs Thou’, she knew that this was no mistress but a very high-class maid. So Grannie Liu and Ban-er got up on the kang at one side, while Patience and Thou Rui’s wife sat near the edge of it on the other, and a little maid came in and poured them all some tea.

Grannie Liu’s attention was distracted by a persistent *tock tock tock tock* not unlike the sound made by a

flour-bolting machine, and she could not forbear glancing round her from time to time to see where it came from. Presently she caught sight of a sort of boxlike object fastened to one of the central pillars of the room, and a thing like the weight of a steelyard hanging down from it, which swung to and fro in ceaseless motion and appeared to be the source of the noise which had distracted her.

'I wonder what that can be,' she thought to herself, 'and what it can be used for?'

As she studied the strange box, it suddenly gave forth a loud *dong!* like the sound of a bronze bell or a copper chime, which so startled the old lady that her eyes nearly popped out of her head. The *dong!* was followed in rapid succession by eight or nine others, and Grannie Liu was on the point of asking what it meant, when all the maids in the house began scurrying about shouting, 'The mistress! The mistress! She'll be coming out now!' and Patience and Thou Rui's wife hurriedly rose to their feet.

'Just stay here, Grannie,' they said. 'When it is time for you to see her, we shall come in and fetch you'; and they went off with the other servants to greet their mistress.

As Grannie Liu sat in silence, waiting with bated breath and head cocked to one side for her summons, she heard a far-off Bound of laughter, followed presently by a sound of rustling dresses as between ten and twenty women entered the reception room and passed from it into the room beyond. Then two or three women bearing large **red** lacquer boxes took up their positions on the side nearest the room in which she Sat and stood there waiting to be called. A voice in the far room called out, 'Serve now, please!' at which, to judge from the noises, most of the women scuttled off, leaving only the few who were waiting at table. A long silence ensued in which not so much as a cheep could be heard; then two women came in bearing a small, low table which they set down on the kang. It was covered with bowls and dishes containing all kinds of meat and fish, only one or two of which appeared to have been touched. At the sight of it Ban-er set up a clamour for some meat and was silenced by Grannie Liu with a resounding slap.

Just at that moment Thou Rui's wife appeared, her face all wreathed in smiles, and advanced towards Grannie Lin beckoning. Grannie Liu slipped off the kang, lifted down Ban-er, and exchanged a few hurried whispers with her in the reception room before waddling into the room beyond.

A dark-red patterned curtain hung from brass hooks over the doorway. Inside, under the window in the south wall, there was a kang covered with a dark-red carpet. At the east end of the kang, up against the wooden partition wall, were a backrest and bolster, both covered in gold brocade, and a large flat cushion for sitting on, also glittering with gold thread. Beside them stood a silver spittoon.

Wang Xi-feng had on a little cap of **red** sable, which she wore about the house for warmth, fastened on with a pearl studded bandeau. She was dressed in a sprigged peach-**pink** gown, with an ermine-lined skirt of dark-red foreign crepe underneath it, and a cloak of slate-**blue** silk with woven coloured insets and lining of grey squirrel around her shoulders. Her face was exquisitely made-up. She was sitting on the edge of the kang, her back straight as a ramrod, with a diminutive pair of tongs in her hand, removing the spent charcoal from a portable hand-warmer. Patience stood beside her carrying a covered teacup on a tiny inlaid lacquer tray. Xi-feng appeared not to have noticed her, for she neither reached out for the cup nor raised her head, but continued picking absorbedly at her hand-warmer. At last she spoke:

'Why not ask them in, then?'

As she did so, she raised her head and saw Zhou Rui's wife with her two charges already standing in front of her. She made a confused movement as if to rise to her feet, welcomed the old lady with a look of unutterable benevolence, and al-most in the same breath said rather crossly to Zhou Rui's wife, 'Why didn't you tell me?'

By this time Grannie Liu was already down on her knees and had touched her head several times to the

floor in reverence to her ‘Aunt Feng’.

‘Stop her, Thou dear!’ said Xi-feng in alarm. ‘She mustn’t do that, I am much too young! In any case, I don’t know her very well. I don’t know what sort of relations we are and what I should call her.’

‘This is the Grannie Liu I was just telling you about,’ said Zhou Rui’s wife.

Xi-feng nodded, and Grannie Liu sat herself down on the edge of the kang Ban-er at once hid himself behind her back and neither threats nor blandishments would induce him to come out and make a bow to his ‘Auntie’.

‘Relations don’t come to see us much nowadays,’ said Xi-feng affably. ‘We’re getting to be quite strangers with everybody. People who know us realize that it is because you are tired of us that you don’t visit us oftener; but some spiteful people who don’t know us so well think it’s our fault, because we have grown too proud.’

Grannie Liu invoked the Lord Buddha in pious disavowal of so shocking a view.

‘It’s hard times that keeps us away. We can’t *afford* to visit. We are afraid that if we came to see you looking the way we are, you would disown us; and even the people at the gate might think we were tramps!’

‘Now you are really being too hard on US! What if Grandfather did make a little bit of a name for himself and we do hold some miserable little appointment? What does it all amount to? It’s all empty show, really. You know what they say: “Even the Emperor has poor relations.” It would be strange indeed if *we* didn’t have a few!’

She turned to Thou Rui’s wife.

‘Have you told Her Ladyship yet?’

‘No, ma’am. I was waiting for your instructions.’

‘Go and have a look, then. If she has anyone with her, you had better leave it; but if she is free, tell her about their visit and see what she says.’

Thou Rui’s wife departed on her errand.

Xi-feng told one of the servants to give Ban-er a handful of sweets, and had just begun a desultory conversation with Grannie Liu when a number of domestics and underlings of either sex arrived to report on their duties.

‘I am entertaining a guest,’ said Xi-feng to Patience when she came in to announce their arrival. ‘Let them leave it until this evening. But if anyone has important business, bring them in and I will deal with it now.’

Patience went out and returned a minute later to say that she had asked them and no one had any business of special importance, so she had sent them all away. Xi-feng nodded.

At this point Thou Rui’s wife returned with a message for Xi-feng.

‘Her Ladyship says she isn’t free today, but that if you will entertain them for her, it will be just the same as if she were to receive them herself. She says please thank them very much for coming. And she says if it’s just an ordinary visit she has nothing more to add; but if they have anything particular to say, she says tell them that they can say it to you instead.’

‘I hadn’t anything particular in mind,’ said Grannie Liu.

‘Only to look in on Her Ladyship and your mistress. Just a visit to relations.’

‘Well all right then, if you are sure you have nothing to say. But if you *have* got anything to say, you really ought to tell the mistress. It will be just the same as if you were to say it to Her Ladyship.’ Zhou Rui’s wife darted a meaningful look at Grannie Liu as she said this.

Grannie Liu perfectly well understood the significance of this look, and a blush of shame overspread her face. Yet if she did not speak up now, what would have been the purpose of her visit? She forced herself to say something.

‘By rights I ought not to mention it today, seeing that this is our first meeting: but as I have come such a long way to see you, it seems silly not to speak…’

She had got no further when the pages from the outer gate announced the arrival of ‘the young master from the Ning mansion’ and Xi-feng gestured to her to stop.

‘It’s all right. There is no need to tell me.’ She turned to the pages. ‘Where is Master Rong, then ?’

A man’s footstep sounded outside and a fresh-faced, willowy youth of seventeen or eighteen in elegant and expensive4ooking winter dress came into the room.

Grannie Liu, acutely embarrassed in this male presence, did not know whether to sit or stand, and looked round her in vain for somewhere to hide herself. Xi-feng laughed at her discomfiture.

‘Don’t mind him; just stay where you are! It’s only ray nephew.’

With a good deal of girlish simpering Grannie Liu sat down again, perching herself obliquely on the extreme edge of the kang.

Jia Rong saluted his aunt Manchu fashion.

‘My father is entertaining an important visitor tomorrow and he wondered if he might borrow the little glass screen that your Uncle Wang’s wife gave you, to put on our kang while he is there. We can let you have it back again as soon as he has gone.’

‘You are too late,’ said Xi-feng. ‘I lent it yesterday to someone else?

Jia Rong flashed a winning smile at her and half-knelt on the side of the kang.

‘If you won’t lend it, my father will say that I didn’t ask properly and I shall get a beating. Come on, Auntie, be a sport! Just for my sake!’

Xi-feng smiled maliciously.

‘I don’t know what’s so special about my family’s things. Heaven knows, you have enough stuff of your own over there; yet you have only to set eyes on anything of ours, and you want it for yourselves.’

Jia Rong’s smile flashed again.

Please, Auntie! Be merciful!’

‘If it’s the tiniest bit chipped,’ said Xi-feng, ‘I’ll have the hide off you!’

She ordered Patience to take the key of the upstairs room and get some reliable servants to carry it over. Delighted with his good luck, *Jia* Rong hurriedly forestalled her.

‘I’ll get some of my own people to carry it. Don’t put yours to a lot of trouble!’ and he hurried out.

Xi-feng suddenly seemed to remember something, and called to him through the window, ‘Rong, come back! ‘

Servants in the yard outside dutifully took up the cry, ‘Master Rong, you’re wanted back again!’

Jia Rong came hurrying back, wreathed in smiles, and looked at Xi-feng with eyebrows arched inquiringly.

Xi-feng, however, sipped very intently from her teacup and mused for a while, saying nothing. Suddenly her face flushed and she gave a little laugh:

‘It doesn’t matter. Come back again after supper. I’ve got company now, and besides, I don’t feel in the mood to tell you.’

‘Yes, Aunt,’ said Jia Rong, and pursing his lips up in a complacent smile he sauntered slowly out of the room.

Having all this while had time to collect herself, Grannie Liu began her speech again:

‘The real reason I have brought your little nephew here today is because his Pa and Ma haven’t anything in the house to eat, and the weather is getting colder, and—and—I thought I’d bring him here to see you ...’ She

gave Ban-er a despairing push. ‘What did your Pa tell you to say when we got here? What was it he sent us for? Look at you! All you can do is sit there eating sweets!’

It was abundantly clear to Xi-feng that the old lady was too embarrassed to go on, and she put her Out of her misery with a gracious smile.

‘It’s quite all right. There is no need to tell me. I quite understand.’ She turned to Thou Rui’s wife. ‘I wonder if Grannie has eaten yet today ?’

‘We were on our way first thing this morning,’ Grannie Liu chimed in. ‘There was no time to think about eating.’

Xi-feng gave orders for a meal to be brought in, and Thou Rui’s wife went out and presently reappeared with a guest’s portion of various choice dishes on a little table, which she set down in the east wing, and to which she then conducted Grannie Liu and Ban-er for their meal.

‘Thou, dear,’ said Xi-feng, ‘will you keep them company and see that they have enough to eat? I shan’t be able to sit with them myself.’ Then calling her aside for a moment she asked, ‘What did Her Ladyship say when you went to report about them just now?’

‘She said they don’t really belong to the family but were adopted into the clan years ago when your grandfather and theirs were working in the same office. She said they haven’t been round much of late years, but in the old days when they used to visit us we never sent them back empty-handed. She said it was nice of them to come and see us today and we should be careful to treat them considerately. And she said if they appear to want anything, she would leave it to you to decide what we should do for them.’

‘No wonder!’ exclaimed Xi-feng when she had heard this account. ‘I couldn’t understand how they could be really related to us if I had never even heard of them.’

While they were talking, Grannie Liu came back from the other room having already finished eating, smacking her lips and sucking her teeth appreciatively, and voicing her thanks for the repast.

‘Sit down,’ said Xi-feng with a smile. ‘I have something to say to you. I quite understand what you were trying to tell me just now. As we are relations, we ought by rights not to *wait* for you to come to our door before helping you when you are in trouble; but there are so many things to attend to in this family, and now that Her Ladyship is getting on a bit she doesn’t always remember them all. And since I took over the management of the household, I find there are quite a lot of relations that I don’t even know about. And then again, of course, though we may look thriving enough from the outside, people don’t realize that being a big establishment like ours carries its own difficulties. They won’t believe it if you tell them, but it’s true. However, since you have come such a long way, and since this is the first time you have ever said a word about needing help, we obviously can’t let you go back empty-handed. Fortunately it so happens that I still haven’t touched any of the twenty taels of silver that Her Ladyship gave me the other day to make clothes for the maids with. If you don’t mind it being so little, you are very welcome to take it.’

When Grannie Liu heard Xi-feng talk about ‘difficulties’ she concluded that there was no hope. Her delight and the way in which her face lit up with pleasure when she heard that she was, after all, to be given twenty taels of sliver can be imagined.

‘We knew you had your troubles,’ she said, ‘but as the saying goes, “A starved camel is bigger than a fat horse.” Say what you like, a hair plucked from your arm is thicker than a man’s waist to folks like us!’

Horrified by the crudity of these expressions, Zhou Rui’s wife, who was standing by, was meanwhile signaling frantically to the old lady to stop. But Xi-feng laughed quite unconcernedly and told Patience to wrap up the silver and also to fetch a string of cash to go with it. The money was set down in front of Grannie Liu.

'Here is the twenty taels of silver,' said Xi-feng. 'Take this for the time being to make some winter clothes for the children with. Some time later on, when you have nothing better to do, look in on us for a day or two for kinship's sake. It's late now, so I won't try to keep you. Give our regards to everybody who ought to be remembered when you get back!'

She rose to her feet, and Grannie Liu, with heartfelt expressions of gratitude, picked up the money and followed Zhou Rui's wife out of the room.

'My dear good woman,' said the latter when they were out of earshot, 'whatever came over you? First, when you met her, you couldn't get a word out; then, when you did start talking, it was all "your nephew" this and "your nephew" that! I hope you won't mind my saying so, but even if the child was a real nephew you would still need to go a bit easy on the familiarities. Now Master Rong, he is her *real* nephew. That's the sort of person a lady like that calls "nephew". Where she would come by a nephew like *this* one, I just do not know!'

'My dear,' replied Grannie Liu with a laugh, 'when I saw the pretty little darling sitting there, I took such a liking to her that my heart was too full to speak.'

Back in Zhou Rui's quarters the two women sat talking for a while. Grannie Liu wanted to leave a piece of silver to buy something for the Zhou children with, but Zhou Rui's wife said she wouldn't hear of it and refused absolutely to accept anything. And so, with many expressions of gratitude, the old lady took her leave and set out once more through the back gate of the mansion.

And if you want to know what happened after she had left, you will have to read the next chapter.

CHAPTER 7

Zhou Rui's wife delivers palace flowers and finds Jia Lian pursuing night sports by day
Jia Bao-yu visits the Ning-guo mansion and has an agreeable colloquy with Qin-shi's brother

When Zhou Rui's wife had finished seeing off Grannie Liu, she went to Lady Wang's place to report. Lady Wang, how-ever, was not in her apartment. The maids said that she had gone off to visit Aunt Xue. Zhou Rui's wife accordingly went out by the gate in the east corner of the compound, crossed the eastern courtyard, and made her way to Pear Tree Court. As she reached the gate of the Court, she came upon Lady Wang's maid, Golden, playing on the front steps with a young girl. Golden realized that Zhou Rui's wife must have come with a message for Lady Wang and indicated that her mistress was inside by turning her chin towards the house and shooting out her lips.

Zhou Rui's wife gently raised a side of the portiere and entered. She found the two sisters in the midst of a seemingly interminable discussion of some domestic odyssey. Not daring to interrupt it, she passed on into the inner room, where Xue Bao-chai, dressed in workaday clothes, her hair unadorned and twisted in a knot on top of her head, sat with her maid Oriole over a little table towards the back of the kang, tracing a pattern for her embroidery. Seeing Zhou Rui's wife enter, she laid down her tracing brush, turned towards her with a smile, and invited her to sit with them.

'How are you, Miss? asked Zhou Rui's wife, returning her smile and sitting down on the edge of the kang. 'I haven't seen you over our side these last two or three days. Has Master Bao been upsetting you?'

'Good gracious, no!' said Bao-chai with a laugh. 'I've had an attack of my old sickness again and

thought I had better rest quietly at home for a day or two. That's the only reason.'

'Very sensible!' said Zhou Ruj's wife. 'But what is this sickness of yours, Miss? Oughtn't you to call in a doctor and get it properly seen to? It's no joke when a young person of your age lets an illness get its grip on them.'

'Oh, don't talk about my illness I' said Bao-chai. 'I don't know how many doctors we must have consulted about it, and how many medicines I must have swallowed, or how much money we must have spent on it - all without any benefit whatsoever. In the end we were fortunate enough to hear of a monk who specialized in treating illnesses that other people couldn't diagnose and asked him to have a look at me. He said that I had a congenital tendency to overheatedness, but that fortunately, as my constitution was a strong one, it wasn't serious. He said the usual medicines wouldn't do it any good, and he gave us a prescription supposed to have been handed down from the Immortals of the Islands. He also gave us a packet of powder with a very unusual fragrance which he said was to be used as the base. He said that if each time I had a turn I took just one of the pills made up from this prescription, the sickness would go away. And the remarkable thing is that they really have proved quite effective.'

'What was this prescription, Miss? If you will tell me, I shall try to remember it so that I can pass it on to others. If I ever met anyone else who had the same sort of illness, I could do them a charity, couldn't I?'

'You don't know what you are asking,' said Bao-chai. 'It's such a finicky prescription, it would drive anyone mad trying to make it up. It's not so much the materials. There is, after all, a limit to the number of drugs from one part of the world or another that are available. It's the *timing* involved that is so difficult.

'You have to take twelve ounces of stamens of the spring-flowering white tree-peony, twelve ounces of stamens of the summer-flowering white water-lily, twelve ounces of stamens of the autumn-flowering white lotus, and twelve ounces of stamens of the winter-flowering white plum and dry them all in the sun on the day of the spring equinox of the year immediately following the year you picked them in. Then you have to mix them with the powder I told you about and pound them all up together in a mortar. Then you must take twelve drams of rain water that fell on the Rain Days in the second month...

Zhou Rui's wife laughed.

'Why, that's already three years it would take! And suppose it didn't rain that year on the Rain Days?'

'Exactly,' said Bao-chai. 'Rain is seldom so obliging. You would just have to wait till the next year. Then you have to collect twelve drams of dew on the day White Dew in the ninth month, twelve drams of frost at Frost Fall in the tenth, and twelve drams of snow at Lesser Snow in the last month of the year, stir these four kinds of water into the mixture, make it up into pills about the size of a longan, and store the pills in an old porcelain jar. The jar is supposed to be buried in a flower bed and only dug up when you have an attack of the illness. Then one of the pills is taken out and swallowed in hot water into which one and a quarter drams of tincture of phellodendron has been stirred.'

'God bless my soul!' Zhou Rui's wife exclaimed. 'You would certainly need some patience! Why, you might wait ten years before getting all those things at the proper times!'

'Well,' said Bao-chai, 'we were lucky. Within only a year or two of the monk's visit we had managed to get all the ingredients together and were able to make up the pills without trouble. We brought them with us when we came to live here and have buried them under one of the pear-trees in the garden.'

'Has this medicine got a name?' Zhou Rui's wife asked.

'Yes,' said Bao-chai. 'The monk said the pills are £alled "Cold Fragrance Pills".'

Zhou Rui's wife nodded appreciatively.

'Tell me, Miss, what exactly *is* this illness of yours?'

'It doesn't really bother me very much. It makes me cough and wheeze a bit. But as soon as I have taken one of the pills, it goes away.'

Zhou Rui's wife was about to ask. something else when they were interrupted by a call from Lady Wang:

'Who have you got in there?'

She hurried back into the outer room to make her report on Grannie Liu. Having finished it, she waited for some comment from Lady Wang, but finding that none was forthcoming, was on the point of withdrawing when Aunt Xue smilingly enjoined her to stay.

'Just a moment! There is something I should like you to take for me.'

She called to someone outside.

'Caltrop!'

The rings of the portiere rattled and the young girl whom Zhou Rui's wife had seen a few minutes before playing on the steps with Golden came into the room.

'You called, Madam?'

'Bring me that box with the flowers in!'

Caltrop went into a side room and returned with a small embroidered box.

'There are twelve artificial flowers in here,' said Aunt Xue. 'They were made in the Imperial Palace, all in the latest fashion. I suddenly thought to myself yesterday what a pity it was to leave them lying around here doing nothing, and how much nicer it would be to give them to the girls to wear. I meant to send them round yesterday but forgot. It's lucky that you came here today, because you will be able to take them for me. There are two each for each of the Jia girls. That leaves six. Then two for Miss Lin, and the remaining four for Mrs Lian.'

'Keep them for Bao-chai to wear,' said Lady Wang. 'What do you want to go bothering about our girls for?'

'You don't know our Bao-chai. She is funny about these things. She has never liked ornaments or make-up or anything of that sort.'

Zhou Rui's wife took up the box and went Out into the courtyard, where she came once more upon Golden, sunning herself on the steps.

'Tell me,' she asked her, 'is that little Caltrop the one they are always talking about who was bought just before they came to the capital? The one they had the murder trial about?'

'That's her,' said Golden.

At that moment Caltrop herself came skipping up with a sunny smile on her face, and Zhou Rui's wife took her by the hand and studied her curiously. Then she turned to Golden again.

'You know, there's something about this child's face that reminds me of Master Rong's wife over at the Ning mansion.'

'That's just what I've said,' Golden agreed.

Zhou Rui's wife asked Caltrop how old she was when she became a slave. Then she asked her where her parents were, what her age was, and what part of the country she came from. But to all of these questions Caltrop only shook her head and said that she didn't remember.

Zhou Rui's wife and Golden exchanged glances and sighed sympathetically.

Bearing her box of flowers, Zhou Rui's wife presently came to the part of the house behind Lady Wang's quarters. Grandmother Jia had recently decided that her granddaughters were becoming too numerous and declared that she would retain only Bao-yu and Dai-yu in her own apartments to keep her amused. Ying-chun, Tan-chun and Xi-chun were to move out into the penthouse behind Lady Wang's, with Li Wan to supervise them and keep them company. Thither, accordingly, Zhou Rui's wife now directed her steps.

A number of little maids were sitting under the eaves there waiting to be called, and just as she arrived, Ying-chun's maid Chess and Tan-chun's maid Scribe came through the porti~re, each carrying a teacup on a tray, from which she deduced that the two cousins must be inside together.

On entering the room, Zhou's wife found Ying-chun and Tan-chun sitting by the window playing Go. She presented the flowers and explained who they were from, and the two girls stopped their game for a moment to bow their thanks, and gave orders to the maids to take charge of them.

'Where is Miss Xi-chun?' Zhou Rui's wife inquired.

'Isn't she in the next room?' said the maids; and there in fact she proved to be, playing with the little nun Sapientia from Water-moon Priory. She asked Zhou Rui's wife what she had come for, and when Zhou Rui's wife took the flowers from the box and explained, she laughed:

'I was telling Sapientia that one of these day I am going to ha-c my hair shaved and go off with her to be a nun, when just at that very moment you came in with these flowers. What shall I do with flowers when I have no hair to stick them in?'

Further pleasantries followed from the others present.

Xi-chun told one of the maids to take the flowers and look after them.

'When did you arrive?' Zhou Rui's wife asked Sapientia. 'And where's that precious Mother Superior of yours gone off to, bald-headed old mischief?'

'We arrived first thing this morning,' said Sapientia. 'Mother Euergesia went off to visit the Yu mansion after she had seen Her Ladyship. She told me to wait for her here.'

Have you had this month's donation yet?' said Zhou Rui's wife. 'It was due on the fifteenth.'

Sapientia said that she didn't know.

'Who looks after the monthly donations nowadays?' asked Xi-chun.

'Yu Xin,' said Zhou Rui's wife.

'That explains it. As soon as Mother Euergesia arrived, Yu Xin's wife was in here like a shot and they were chattering together for ages. I expect that's what it was about.'

After gossiping a bit longer with Sapientia, Zhou Rui's wife made her way to Xi-feng's quarters. To get there she had to go down a passage-way between two walls, under the windows at the back of Li Wan's apartments, along the foot of an ornamental wail, and through a gateway in the western cornet of the compound. When she entered Xi-feng's reception room, a maid sitting on the threshold of the inner room hurriedly waved her away and told her to go across to the other side of the house. Taking the hint, Zhou Rui's wife tiptoed quietly into the room opposite, where she found the baby's nurse patting her rhythmically to make her sleep.

'Is the mistress taking her afternoon nap?' she asked the nurse in a low whisper. 'I think you'll have to wake her, even if she is.'

The nurse smiled, grimaced, and shook her head. Zhou Rui's wife was about to ask her what she meant when she heard a low laugh in what was unmistakably Jia Lian's voice from the room opposite. It was followed almost immediately by the sound of the door opening, and Patience came out carrying a large copper basin which she asked one of the maids to fetch water in.

'Ah, Mrs Zhou!' she said, catching sight of Zhou Rul's wife and crossing into the room opposite 'What brings you back again?'

Zhou Rui's wife hastily rose to her feet and picking up the box, proferred it to Patience and explained her mission. Patience opened the lid, selected four of the flowers, and slipped away again for several minutes. She came back with two still in her hand, which she gave to a little page called Sunshine.

'Take these to Master Rong's wife over in the Ning mansion and tell her they are for her to wear,' she said. Then turning to Zhou Rui's wife she asked her to convey Xi-feng's thanks to the donor.

Zhou Rui's wife now made her way towards Grandmother jia's apartments. Just as she was coming out of the covered passage-way, she ran head-on into her daughter, all dressed up in her best clothes having just arrived on a visit from her mother-in4aw's.

'What's suddenly brought you here at a time like this ?' she asked her daughter.

'How have you been keeping, Mother? I've been waiting at your place for hours for you to

come back. What's been keeping you all this time? I got tired of waiting. I thought I'd go and say "hullo" to Her Old Ladyship, and now I was just on my way to see Her Ladyship. Have you still not finished then? What's that you've got in your hand?'

Zhou Rui's wife laughed.

'Today is not my lucky day! First of all someone called Grarnie Liu turned up, so like a fool I spend half the day rushing around with her. Then, as if that wasn't enough, Her Ladyships sister sees me and gets me delivering flowers to the young ladies. I haven't finished yet. Now what have you come here today for? Something's gone wrong, I'll be bound !'

'I don't know how you always manage to guess, Mother, but you're right: it has. I'll be honest with you. My man had a cup too much to drink the other day and got into a fight with someone, and now, Out of spite, they are trying to stir up trouble for him. They say his papers aren't in order, and they've reported him to the yamen and want to get him deported back South to his old village. So I thought I'd come and ask your advice, Mother, and see if you couldn't get someone here to put ma word for him. Do you think there's anyone who would be able to help?'

'I knew it would be something like this,' said Zhou Rui's wife. 'Well, cheer up, it's not 80 serious as all that! You just go back and wait while I take these flowers to Miss Lin. You can't see Her Ladyship now. She and the young mistress are both busy.'

The daughter obediently turned back to her mother's quarters. As she went, she said pleadingly,

'Be as quick as you can, Mother, won't you?'

'Yes, yes, yes. I'll be as quick as I can! You young people take everything so tragically! Lack of experience, that's what it is!' said Zhou Rui's wife, and moved on to Dai-yu's room.

Dai-yu was not in her own room, but with Bao-yu, trying to undo metal puzzles.

'Miss Lin,' said Zhou Rui's wife with a smile, 'Mrs Xue asked me to give you these flowers.'

'What flowers ?' said Bao-yu. 'Let me see!'

He stretched Out his arm, took the box from Zhou Rui's wife, and looked. Two artificial flowers, exquisitely fashioned by Palace craftsmen out of silk gauze, lay inside it. Dai-yu glanced over his arm into the box.

'Am I the only one getting these, or have the others had some too?'

'All the young ladies are getting them,' said Zhou Rui's wife. 'These two are for you, Miss.'

'I thought as much,' said Dai-yu sneeringly. 'I get the leavings when everyone else has had their pick.'

Zhou Rui's wife received this sally in silence, not daring to retort.

'What were you doing at my aunt's place, Zhou?' Bao-yu asked.

'Her Ladyship was there, and I had something to tell her.

Then while I was over there, Mrs Xue took the opportunity of giving me these flowers to deliver for her.'

Was Miss Bao-chai there?' Bao-yu asked. 'Why hasn't she been round these last few days?'

'She's not very well.'

Bao-yu turned to his maids.

'Which of you will go and see Miss Bao-chai for me? Say that Miss Lin and I send our regards to her and her mother, and ask her if her illness is any better and what she's taking for it. Say that I really ought to go myself, but that as I've just got back from my lessons and have caught a bit of a cold, I shall be coming round another day.'

Snow**pink** said that she would go, and she and Zhou Rui's wife left the room together and went their separate ways.

This son4n4aw of Zhou Rui's who had got himself into trouble was none other than Jia Yu-cun's old friend, Leng Zi-xing. He had recently become involved in a lawsuit arising out of the sale of some antiques, and had asked his wife to get strings pulled for him at the mansion. Zhou Rui's wife made light of the affair, confident of her employers' power to influence. A word to Xi-feng in the evening, and it would be as good as settled.

*

At lighting-up time that evening Xi-feng came in partial negligee (having removed her ornaments for the night) to report on the day's affairs to Lady Wang.

Today I received the things sent us by the Zhen family. The Zhens have their own boat delivering seasonal produce for the New Year, so I have given their people our presents to the Zhens to take back on their return journey.'

Lady Wang nodded.

'I've got our birthday presents ready for the Earl of Linan's mother,' continued Xi-feng. 'Who would you like us to send with them ?'

'Just see which women are free and send four of them,' replied Lady Wang. 'You don't have to ask me about things like that I'

'Today Cousin Zhen's wife invited me to spend tomorrow with them at the other house,' Xi-feng continued. 'Is there anything tomorrow that needs doing here ?'

'Whether there is or not,' said Lady Wang, 'I don't see that it matters. Generally when she brings an invitation it is for all of us, and you are naturally too busy to go. This time the invitation is to you personally, which shows that she had deliberately arranged this in order to give you a rest. The thought is a kind one, and it would be ungrateful to refuse. I think you ought to go.'

By now Li Wan and the three girls had also arrived for their evening duty, and when all had wished Lady Wang good night they departed to their different rooms.

Next day, as soon as Xi-feng had completed her toilet, she first reported to Lady Wang and then went to take her leave of Grandmother Jia. Hearing that she was going to the other house, Bao-yu said he wanted to go too, and Xi-feng was obliged to say that she would take him and to stand waiting for him while he changed his clothes. The two then got into a mule-cart and were soon inside the Ning-guo mansion, where Cousin Zhen's wife You-shi, her son Jia Rong, her little daughter-in-law Qin-shi, and a large number of women attendants and maids were standing outside the inner gate ready to welcome them.

You-shi's encounters with Xi-feng were always the occasion of good-humoured banter. Taking Bao-yu by the hand and chatting to Xi-feng, she conducted them both into tbe main reception room, where they all sat down and were served tea by Qin-shi.

'Well,' said Xi-feng, 'what have you asked me here for? Something nice, I hope! If it's a present, you'd better bring it now; I'm a busy woman!'

Before You-shi could think of a suitable retort, one of the women attendants replied for her:

'You ought not to have come, Mrs Lian! Now that you're here, we've got you in our power and you'll have to do what *we* say for a change!'

At that moment Jia Rong came in and paid his respects to the visitors. Bao-yu asked what had happened to Cousin Zhen.

'He's gone into the country to see Father,' said You-shi. Then she added, 'It's not much fun for you sitting here. Why don't you go off and amuse yourself inside?'

'You've chosen a good day to come, Uncle Bao,' said little Qin-shi. 'Last time you were here you wanted to see my brother. Well, today he's here. He's sitting in the study at this very moment. Why don't you go in and see him?'

Bao-yu was for rushing off straight away. You-shi hurriedly ordered some servants to go after him in discreet attendance.

'Well now, just a minute I' said Xi-feng. 'Why not ask him in here so that I can see him too?'

‘Oh dear, I don’t think that would do at all!’ said You-shi. ‘Some people’s children aren’t used to rackety ways like ours. Some people’s children are quiet and refined. If they were to meet a termagant like you, they might die of laughing.’

‘He’ll be lucky if *I* don’t laugh at *him,’* said Xi-feng cheer-fully. ‘He’d better not try laughing at *me!’*

‘He’s very, very shy, Auntie,’ said Jia Rong. We are afraid that if you saw him it might only irritate you.’

‘Fiddlestick!’ said Xi-feng. ‘I don’t care if he’s a three-faced wonder with eight arms, I still want to see him. Stop fatting about and bring him in, or I’ll box your ears!’

Jia Rong cringed in mock alarm.

‘Yes, Auntie! No need to get so fierce! We’ll bring him in straight away.’

They both laughed, and Jia Rong disappeared for a while and presently came back leading a youth who, though somewhat thinner than Bao-yu, was mote than his equal in freshness and liveliness of feature, in delicacy of complexion, handsomeness of figure, and grace of deportment, but whose painful bashfulness created a somewhat girlish impression. He approached Xi-feng and made his bow with a shy confusion which delighted her.

‘You’ve met your match!’ she said to Bao-yu with a laugh, nudging him playfully. Then, leaning forward and gripping the boy’s hand in her own, she drew him down beside her and proceeded in a very deliberate manner to ask him how old he was, what books he was reading, and various other matters -among them his name, which was Qin Zhong.

When the maids and womenfolk in attendance on Xi-feng realized that she was about to meet Qin Zhong and that they had come without the requisite material for a First Meeting present, they had sent some of their number back to consult Patience in the other house. Patience had, at her own discretion, selected a suitable length of material and two little ‘Top of the List’ solid gold medallions to give the messengers. These gifts now arrived for Xi-feng (who thought them somewhat on the meagre side) to give to Qin Zhong. When he and his sister had formally thanked her, the company sat down to lunch, after which You-shi, Xi-feng and Qinshi settled down to a game of cards, while Bao-yu and Qin Zhong left the table to converse elsewhere.

When Bao-yu first set eyes on Qin Zhong it had been as though part of his soul had left him. For a while he stared blankly, oblivious to all around him, while a stream of idle fancies passed through his mind.

‘How perfect he is! Who would have believed there could be such perfection? Now that I have seen him I know that I am just a pig wallowing in the mud, a mangy dog! Why, why did I have to be born in this pretentious *aristocratic* household? Why couldn’t I have been born in the family of some poor scholar or low-grade clerk? Then I could have been neat him and got to know him, and my life would have been worth living. Though I am so much richer and more nobly born than he, what use are my fine clothes but to covet up the dead and rotten wood beneath? What use the luxuries I eat and drink but to fill the ces~it and swell the stinking sewer of my inside? 0 rank and riches! How you poison everything!’

At the same time, Qin Zhong, struck by Bao-yu’s rare good looks and princely beating and—even mote perhaps—by the golden coronet and embroidered clothing and the train of pretty maids and handsome pages who attended him, was thinking:

‘No wonder my sister raves about him whenever his name is mentioned! Why did I have to he born in a poor *respectable* family? How I should have liked to get to know him: to have shared moments of warmth and affection with him! But it was not to be!’

Each, plunged in reverie, for a while said nothing. Then Bao-yu asked Qin Zhong about his reading, and Qin Zbong replied—a full, frank reply, without the trappings of politeness: and presently they were in the midst of a delightful conversation and were already like old friends.

After a while tea and various confections were brought in. ‘We two shan’t be drinking any wine,’ Bao-yu said to the ladies. ‘May we have a plate or two of these things set out on the little kang in the other room? We can talk in

there without disturbing you,'

The two boys moved into the inner room for their tea.

In between plying Xi-feng with wine and delicacies, Qinshi slipped in for a word with Bao-yu.

'My brother's quite young, Uncle Bao. Please, for my sake, don't mind him if he does anything to offend you! He may be shy, but he's got quite a nasty temper. He's not really easy to get on with at all.

'You go along I' said Bao-yu with a smile. 'We shall be all right!'

After a few admonitory words to her brother, Qin-shi went back to look after xi-feng.

Some minutes later Xi-feng and You- shi sent a servant in to inquire whether the boys would like anything else to eat, adding that they had only to ask if they wanted anything. Bao-yu promised that they would; but his mind was not on eating and drinking, and he continued to question Qin Zhong about his life at home.

'My private tutor resigned last year,' Qin Zhong told him. 'Father is quite old, and as his health is not very good and his job keeps him terribly busy, he hasn't been able to do anything yet about getting me another one. At the moment I am lust going over old lessons on my own at home. The trouble is, though, that if you want to get on in a subject, you really need one or two like-minded people to study with you, so that every so often you can all discuss what you have been reading...'

'Exactly!' Bao-yu put in eagerly, not waiting for him to finish. 'We have a private school in our family to which any members of the clan who can't manage private tuition may send their children, and boys from related families who aren't in the clan can also be admitted. I have been at a loose end ever since my tutor went home on leave, and Father would have liked me to go to this school for revision until he gets back next year and I can be taught privately again. But Grandmother said that with so many boys in the school I should be sure to get up to mischief, and it would do me more harm than good. She also said I couldn't in any case go then, because I'd only just recovered after several days in bed. And so it got put off.

'From what you say, your father is worried about the same problem as mine; so why not tell him about this school when you get back today and ask him if you can join? I should be there to keep you company, and we could both help each other. I think it would be a marvellous idea.'

'The other day when the question of engaging a tutor came up, Father mentioned this school of yours as a possible alternative,' said Qin Zhong. 'He was going to come over and have a word with my sister's father-in-law about it and get him to recommend me; but they were busy here at the time and it didn't seem the right moment to bother them with a little thing like this. However, if you are really of the opinion that I could be of some service to you, even if it's only grinding your ink or cleaning your ink-stone, do please arrange it as soon as you can, before we both get too rusty! We should be relieving our parents of an anxiety and having the pleasure of each other's company at one and the same time; so it would be a good arrangement from every point of view.'

'Don't worry!' said Bao-yu. 'I'll tell Cousin Lian's wife presently, when we join the others. Then when we get back home tonight, *you* must tell your father and *I* shall tell my grandmother. There's no reason that I can see why this shouldn't be settled immediately.'

They had concluded their discussion in gathering dusk, and now moved back into the lamplit outer room and watched the ladies at their cards for a while. When the latter had finished and had added up their scores, it appeared that Qin-shi and You-shi had lost to Xi-feng and owed her a dramatic entertainment at which the players and the drinks were to be provided at their expense. In the course of dinner, which was now served and at which they were joined by the two boys, it was decided that this should take place in two days' time.

As it was now quite dark, You-shi gave her women orders to see that two menservants were detailed to attend Qin Zhong on his way back home. The women were gone on their errand an unusually long time and eventually Qin Zhong rose to take his leave.

'Who has been chosen to go with him?' You-shi asked.

‘They have asked Big Jiao,’ said the women, ‘but it seems that he is terribly drunk and swearing at everybody.’

You-shi and Qin-shi were indignant.

‘Whatever did they want to go and ask *him* for? Any of the younger ones would have done. What was the point of provoking *him?*’

‘I always said you were too soft with people,’ said Xi-feng. ‘You really mustn’t let servants get away with it like this. I never heard of such a thing I’

‘You don’t know Big Jiao,’ said You-shi. ‘Even Father couldn’t do anything with him, let alone Then. When he was young he went with Grandfather on three or four of his campaigns and once saved his life by pulling him from under a heap of corpses and carrying him to safety on his back. He went hungry himself and stole things for his master to eat; and once when he had managed to get half a cupful of water, he gave it to his master and drank horse’s urine himself. Because of these one or two acts of heroism he was always given special treatment during Grandfather’s lifetime; so naturally we don’t like to upset him now. But since he’s grown old he has let himself go completely. He drinks all the time, and when he’s drunk he starts abusing everybody—literally *everybody*. I’ve repeatedly told the steward not to give him jobs to do—to behave exactly as though he were dead and ignore him completely. Why on earth should he have chosen him today?’

‘I know this Big Jiao all right,’ said Xi-feng, ‘and I still say that you are too weak. You ought to send him away. Right away. Send him to live on one of your farms: that would put a stop to his nonsense I’ She turned to the women and asked if her own carriage was ready yet. The women replied that it was waiting, and she rose to take her leave and, taking Bao-yu by the hand, went out on to the steps, attended by You-shi and the rest.

In the flickering light of many lanterns the pages stood stiffly to attention on the pavement below, while Big Jiao, encouraged by Cousin Zhen’s absence to indulge his talent for drunken abuse, was getting to work on the Chief Steward, Lai Sheng, accusing him of being unfair, of always dropping on the weakest, and so on and so forth.

‘If there’s a cushy job going you give it to someone else, but when it’s a question of seeing someone home in pitch bloody darkness, you pick on me. Mean, rotten bugger! Call yourself a steward? Some steward! Don’t you know who Old Jiao is? I can lift my *foot* up higher than your head I Twenty years ago I didn’t give a damn for *anybody*, never mind a pack of little misbegotten abortions like you!’

He was just getting into his stride when Jia Rong came out to see Xi-feng off in her carriage. The servants shouted to Big Jiao to stop, but without success. Impatient of the old man’s insolence, Jia Rong cursed him angrily.

‘Tie him up,’ he said to the servants. ‘We shall see if he is still so eager for death tomorrow morning, when he has sobered up a bit.’

But Big Jiao was not to be intimidated by such as Jia Rong. On the contrary, he staggered up to him and bellowed even louder.

‘Oh ho! Little Rong, is it? Don’t you come the Big Master stuff with me, sonny boy! Never mind a little bit of a kid like you, even your daddy and your granddaddy don’t dare to try any funny stuff with Old Jiao. If it wasn’t for Old Jiao, where would you lot all be today, with your rank and your fancy titles and your money and all the other things you enjoy? It was your great-granddad, whose life I saved when he was given up for dead, that won all this for you, by the sweat of his brow. And what reward do I get for saving him? Nothing. Instead you come to me and you put on your Big Master act. Well, I’ll tell you something. You’d better watch Out. Because if you don’t, you’re going to get a shiny white knife inside you, and it’s going to come out red!’

‘You’d better hurry up and send this unspeakable creature about his business,’ said Xi-feng to Jia Rong from her carriage. ‘It’s positively dangerous to keep a man like this on the premises. If any of our acquaintance get to know that a family like ours can’t keep even a semblance of discipline about the place, we shall become a laughing-stock.’

Jia Rong assented meekly.

Several of the servants, seeing that Big Jiao had got quite out of hand and that something had to be done at all costs, rushed up and overpowered him, and throwing him face downward on the ground, frog-marched him off to the stables. By now even Cousin Zhen was being included in his maledictions, which became wilder and noisier as he shouted to his captors that he wanted to go to the ancestral temple and weep before the tablet of his old Master.

'Who would ever have believed the Old Master could spawn this filthy lot of animals?' he bawled. 'Up to their dirty little tricks every day. I know. Father-in-law pokes in the ashes. Auntie has it off with nevvy. Do you think I don't know what you're all up to? Oh, we "hide our broken arm in our sleeve"; but you don't fool me.'

Terrified out of their wits at hearing a fellow-servant utter such enormities, the grooms and pages tied him up and stuffed his mouth with mud and horse-dung.

Big Jiao's last words had been clearly audible to Xi-feng and Jia Rong, though they were a considerable distance away, but they both pretended not to have heard. Bao-yu, sitting in the carriage with Xi-feng, was less inhibited.

'Feng, what did he mean when he said "Father-in-law pokes in the ashes"?'

'Hold your tongue!' Xi-feng snapped back at him, livid. 'It's bad enough for a person in your position to even listen to such drunken filth, but to go asking questions about it, really! Just wait till I tell your mother! You're going to get the biggest hiding you've ever had in your life!'

Terrified by her vehemence, Bao-yu implored forgiveness. 'Please, Feng, don't tell her! I promise never to say those words again.'

Xi-feng's manner at once became soothing and indulgent.

'That's my good little cuzzy! When we get back I must tell Grandma to make them explain to the school about Qin Zhong and arrange for him to be admitted soon.'

As they talked, the carriage bore them back into Rong-guo House. But what happened there will be told in the chapter which follows.

CHAPTER 8

Jia Bao-yu is allowed to see the strangely
corresponding golden locket
And Xue Bao-chai has a predestined encounter
with the Magic Jade

When Bao-yu and Xi-feng were back and had seen the others, Bao-yu told Grandmother Jia of his wish to have Qin Zhong admitted to the clan school. He pointed out that a congenial study-companion would stimulate him to greater effort and gave her a glowing account of Qin Zhong's amiable qualities. Xi-feng was at hand to lend her support. She told Grandmother Jia that Qin Zhong would be calling on her within a day or two to pay his respects. Their infectious enthusiasm put the old lady in a high good humour, which Xi-feng took advantage of to ask if she would accompany her to the dramatic entertainment which her opponents had promised in two days' time.

In spite of her years Grandmother Jia loved any kind of excitement and when, two days later, You-shi came to fetch Xi-feng, the old lady did in fact accompany them, taking Lady Wang, Dai-yu and Bao-yu as well. By about noon, however, she was ready to go back and rest, and Lady Wang, who disliked noise and excitement,

took the opportunity to leave with her. This left Xi-feng as principal guest, and she moved into the place of honour and stayed there for the rest of the day, enjoying herself immensely and not returning until late in the evening.

After accompanying Grandmother Jia back to her apartment and seeing her safely settled down for her nap, Bao-yu would have liked to go back and watch some more plays but was afraid that his presence would be an inconvenience to Qinshi and his other 'juniors'. Remembering that Bao-chai had been at home unwell during the past few days and that he had still not been to see her, he thought he would go there instead arid pay her a call, but fearing that if he went the quickest way through the corner gate behind the main hall he might meet with some entanglement on the way or, worse, run into his father, he decided to go by a more circuitous route.

The maids and nurses who attended him had been expecting him to change into his everyday clothes, but seeing him go out of the inner gate again without doing so, followed after him, assuming that he was going back to the other mansion to watch the plays. To their surprise, however, he turned left when he reached the covered passage-way instead of going straight on, and made off in a north-easterly direction.

But he was out of luck, for as he did so he found himself facing Zhan Guang and Shan Ping-ren, two of the literary gentlemen patronized by his father, who were walking towards him from the opposite direction. They descended on him gleefully, one of them clasping him round the waist, the other taking him by a hand.

'Angelic boy! How seldom one has the pleasure! Is it really you, or is this some delightful dream?'

They prattled on for what seemed an age before finally releasing him. As they were going, one of the old nurses detained them a moment longer.

'Have you two gentlemen just come from the Master's?'

The two gentlemen nodded and smiled conspiratorially:

'Sir Zheng is in his little study in the Su Dong-po Rooms, having his afternoon nap. All is well!'

They hurried off. Bao-yu smiled too, relieved that his father was safely out of the way. Turning once again, this time north-wards, he made his way swiftly towards Pear Tree Court.

Once more he was unlucky. The Clerk of Stores Wu Xindeng, a man called Dai Liang who was foreman at the granary, and five other foremen were just at that moment coming out of the counting-house together and, catching sight of Bao-yu, at once stood respectfully to attention. One of their number, a buyer called Qian Hua who had not seen Bao-yu for some considerable time, hurried forward, dropped on his right knee, and touched his hand to the ground in the Manchu salute. Bao-yu smilingly extended a hand to raise him up. The men all relaxed in smiles.

'I saw some of your calligraphy in town the other day, Master Bao,' said one of them. 'It's getting really good I When are you going to give us a few sheets for ourselves, to put up on the wall?'

'Where did you see it?' Bao-yu asked.

'Any number of places,' the men told him. 'Everyone has been praising it no end. They even come to us asking for specimens.'

'You can have some easily enough if you really want to,' Bao-yu said. 'You have only to ask one of my boys.'

He hurried on. The men waited for him to pass before dispersing about their business.

To omit further details of his progress, Bao-yu came at last to Pear Tree Court, and going first into Aunt Xue's room, found her giving instructions to her maids about some embroidery. Her response to his greeting was to draw him t~ wards her and clasp him to her bosom m an affectionate embrace.

'What a nice, kind boy to think of us on a cold day like this! Come up on the kang and get warm!'

She ordered a maid to bring him some ‘boiling hot tea’.

Bao-yu inquired whether Cousin Pan was at home. Aunt Xue sighed.

‘Pan is like a riderless horse: always off enjoying himself somewhere or other. He won’t spend a single day at home if he can help it.’

‘What about Bao-chai? Is she quite better?’

‘Ah yes, of course!’ said Aunt Xue. ‘You sent someone to ask about her the other day, didn’t you? That was very thoughtful of you. I think she’s inside. Go in and have a look! It’s warmer in there than here. You go in and sit down, and I’ll be with you in a moment when I’ve finished tidying up.’

Bao-yu got down from the kang and going to the doorway of the inner room, lifted up the rather worn4ooking **red** silk curtain which covered it. Bao-chai was sitting on the kang inside, sewing. Her lustrous black hair was done up in a simple bun without any kind of ornament. She was wearing a honey-coloured padded gown, a mulberry-coloured sleeveless jacket with a pattern in gold and silver thread, and a **green**ish-**yellow** padded skirt. All her clothing had the same sensible; rather well-worn look about it.

He saw no hint of luxury or show,
only a chaste, refined sobriety;
to some her studied taciturnity
might seem to savour of duplicity; but she herself saw in conformity
the means of guarding her simplicity.

‘Have you quite recovered, cousin?’ Bao-yu asked.

Raising her head, Bao-chai saw Bao-yu enter the room. She rose quickly to her feet and smiled at him.

‘I am quite better now. It was nice of you to think of me.’ She made him sit on the edge of the kang and ordered Oriole to pour him some tea. Then she proceeded to ask him first about Grandmother Jia, then about Lady Wang and then about the girls, while her eye took in the details of his dress.

He had a little jewel-encrusted coronet of gold filigree on the top of his head and a circlet in the form of two dragons supporting a pearl round his brow. He was dressed in a narrow-sleeved, full-skirted robe of russet-**green** material covered with a pattern of writhing dragons and lined and trimmed with white fox-fur. A butterfly-embroidered sash with fringed ends was fastened round his waist, and from his neck hung a padlock-shaped amulet, a lucky charm, and the famous jade said to have been inside his mouth when he was born.

Bao-chai’s eye came to rest on the jade.

‘I am always hearing about this famous stone of yours,’ she said smilingly, ‘but I have never yet had a chance of examining it really closely. Today I think I should like to have a look.’

She moved forward as she spoke, and Bao-yu too leaned towards her, and taking the stone from his neck, put it into her hand.

Looking at it as it lay on her palm, she saw a stone about the size of a sparrow’s egg, glowing with the suppressed, milky radiance of a sunlit cloud and veined with iridescent streaks of colour.

Reader, you will, of course, remember that this jade was a transformation of that same great stone block which once lay at the foot of **Green**sickness Peak in the Great Fable Mountains. A certain *jesting poet* has written these verses about it:

Nü-wa’s stone-smelting is a tale unfounded:
On such weak fancies our Great Fable’s grounded.

Lost now, alack! and gone *my* heavenly stone—
Transformed to this vile bag of flesh and bone.
For, in misfortune, gold no longer gleams;
And bright jade, when fate frowns, lack-lustre seems.
Heaped charnel-bones none can identify
Were golden girls and boys in days gone by.

The words which the scabby-headed monk had incised on the stone when he found it lying in its diminished shape under **Green**sickness Peak were as follows.

(On the front side)

MAGIC JADE

Mislay me not, forget me not,
And hale old age shall be your lot.

(On the reverse side)

1. Dispels the harms of witchcraft.
2. Cures melancholic distempers.
3. Foretells good and evil fortune.

When Bao-chai had looked at the stone all over, she turned back to the inscription on the front and repeated it a couple of times to herself out loud:

'Mislay me not, forget me not,
And hale old age shall be your lot.'

'Why aren't you pouring the tea?' she asked Oriole. 'What are you standing there gawping for?'

Oriole laughed.

'Because those words sounded like a perfect match to the ones on your necklace.'

'So you have an inscription, too?' said Bao-yu pricking up his ears. 'I must have a look.

'Don't take any notice of her!' said Bao-chai. 'There is no inscription.'

'Cousin, cousin,' said Bao-yu entreatingly, *'you've* had a look at *mine*. Be fair!'

Bao-chai could not escape the logic of this entreaty.

'There is a motto on it which someone gave us once for luck and which we had engraved on it,' she admitted. 'That's the only reason I always wear it; otherwise it would be too tiresome to have a heavy thing like this hanging round one's neck all the time.'

As she was speaking she undid the top buttons of her jacket and gown and extracted the necklace that she was wearing over the dark **red** shift beneath. Its pendant was a locket of shining solid gold, bordered with sparkling gems. There was a line of writing engraved on either side of it which together made up the words of a charm:

Ne’er leave me, ne’er abandon me:
And years of health shall be your fee.

He recited them a couple of times and then recited the word:
of his own Inscription a couple of times.

‘Why, yes I’ he cried delightedly. ‘The two inscriptions are a perfect match!’

‘A scabby-headed old monk gave Miss Bao-chai the words,’ said Oriole. ‘He said they must be engraved on something made of gold...’

Bao-chai angrily cut her short, telling her to mind her business and pour the tea. To change the subject she asked Bao-yu where he had just come from.

Bao-yu was now sitting almost shoulder to shoulder with her and as he did so became aware of a penetrating fragrance that seemed to emanate from her person.

‘What incense do you use to scent your clothes with, cousin?’ he asked. ‘I have never smelt such a delicious perfume.’

‘I can’t stand incense perfumes,’ said Bao-chai. ‘I could never see the point of smoking perfectly good, clean clothe:
over an incense-pot.’

‘In that case, what is this perfume I can smell?’

Bao-chai thought for a moment.

‘I know! It must be the Cold Fragrance Pill I took this morning.’

‘What’s a Cold Fragrance Pill ?’ said Bao-yu with a laugh. ‘Won’t you give me one to try?’

‘Now you’re being silly again. Medicine isn’t something to be taken for amusement.’

Just at that moment the servants outside announced ‘Miss Lin’ arid almost simultaneously Dai-yu came flouncing into the room. Catching sight of Bao-yu she let out a wail of mock dismay.

‘Oh dear! I *have* chosen a bad time to come!’

The others rose and invited her to be seated.

‘Why did you say that?’ Bao-chai asked her.

‘If I had known he was coming, I shouldn’t have come myself.’

‘What exactly do you mean by that?’

‘What do I mean by that ?’ said Dai-yu. ‘I mean that if I only come when he does, then when I don’t come you won’t have any visitors. Whereas if we space ourselves out so that he comes one day and I come the next, it will never get either too lonely or too noisy for you. I shouldn’t have thought that needed much explaining.’

Observing that Dai-yu was wearing a greatcoat of **red** camlet over her dress, Bao-yu asked whether it was snowing outside.

‘It’s been snowing for some time,’ said one of the old women standing below the kang.

Bao-yu asked someone to go and fetch his winter cape.

‘You see!’ said Dai-yu. ‘When I come, he has to go!’

‘Who said anything about going?’ said Bao-yu. ‘I just want them to have it ready for me.’

‘It’s no time to go now, while it’s still snowing,’ said Bao-yu’s old nurse, Nannie Li. ‘Much better stay here and play with your cousins. In any case, I think your Aunt Xue is getting tea ready for you. I’ll send a maid to fetch your cape. Shall I tell the boys outside they can go?’

Bao-yu nodded, and Nannie Li went outside and dismissed the pages.

By now Aunt Xue had finished laying tea, which included a number of delicious4ooking things to eat, and invited the cousins to partake. While they were doing so, Bao-yu happened to mention the excellent goose-foot preserve made by his Cousin Zhen's wife that he had eaten at the Ning mansion only two days previously. Aunt Xue at once hurried out and fetched some of her own for him to try.

'This really needs to be eaten with wine,' said Bao-yu.

Aunt Xue gave orders for some of the best wine to be decanted; but Nannie Li disapproved.

'He shouldn't have wine, Mrs Xue.'

'Oh go on, Nannie I' Bao-yu pleaded good-humouredly. 'I shall only drink one cup.'

'It's no good!' said Nannie Li. 'I don't mind if you drink a hogshead as long as your grandmother or your mother is there. But look at the trouble I got into the other day just because when I had my back turned for a moment some wretched person who ought to have known better gave you a sip or two to humour you! I didn't hear the end of it for days after.

'You don't know how wild he can be, Mrs Xue,' she continued. 'And he gets even worse when he's had something to drink. With Her Old Ladyship you can never tell. One day when she's feeling high-spirited she'll let him drink as much as he likes; other days she won't let him touch a drop. But come what may, I'm always the one that gets into trouble.'

'Poor old thing!' said Aunt Xue with a laugh. 'Have a drink yourself and stop worrying! I'll see that he doesn't drink too much. And if Lady Jia *does* say anything, I shall take full responsibility? She turned to one of the maids: 'Come on' now! Pour Nannie a nice warm cup of wine to keep the cold out!'

Nannie Li could scarcely sustain her objection after this and went off with the other servants to have her drink.

'Don't bother to heat the wine for me,' said Bao-yu. 'I prefer it cold.

'Good gracious, that will never do! 'said Aunt Xue. 'You mustn't drink wine cold, or when you write your hand will shake!'

'I'm surprised at you, Cousin Bao!' said Bao-chai with a smile. 'With all your enthusiasm for out-of-the-way learning, fancy not knowing a thing like that! Wine has an exceptionally fiery nature, and therefore must be drunk warm in order to be quickly digested. If it is drunk cold, it congeals inside the body and harms it by absorbing heat from the internal organs. From this day on you must reform! No more cold wine!'

Dai-yu, who sat cracking melon-seeds between her teeth throughout this homily, smiled ironically. Just at that moment her maid Snowgoose came hurrying in with a little hand-warmer for her.

'Who told you to bring this?' Dai-yu asked her. 'Very kind of them, I am sure. But I was not actually freezing to death here.'

'Nightingale told me to bring it, Miss. She was afraid you might be cold.'

'I am glad you are so ready to obey her. Generally when *1* tell you to do anything it goes in one ear and out the other; yet anything *she* tells you to do is followed Out more promptly than an Imperial Edict!'

Bao-yu knew perfectly well that these words were really intended for him, but made no reply, beyond laughing good humouredly. Bao-chai, long accustomed to Dai-yu's peculiar ways, also ignored them. But Aunt Xue protested.

'You've always been rather delicate and you've always felt the cold badly. Surely it was nice of them to think of you?'

'You don't understand, Aunt,' said Dai-yu. 'It doesn't matter here, with you; but some people might be

deeply offended at the sight of one of my maids rushing in with a hand-warmer. It's as though I thought my hosts couldn't supply one themselves if I needed it. Instead of saying how thoughtful the maid was, they would put it down to my arrogance and lack of breeding.'

'You are altogether too sensitive, thinking of things like that,' said Aunt Xue. 'Such a thought would never have crossed my mind!'

Bao-yu had soon finished his third cup of wine and Nannie Li once more came forward to restrain him. But Bao-yu, who was now warm and happy and in the midst of a hilarious conversation with his cousins, was naturally unwilling to stop, and pleaded humbly with the old lady for a reprieve.

'Nannie darling, just two more cups and then I'll stop!'

'You'd better look out,' said Nannie Li. 'Your father's at home today. He'll be asking you about your lessons before you know where you are.'

At these words all Bao-yu's happiness drained away. Slowly he set down his cup and bowed his head in dejection.

'Don't spoil everyone's enjoyment,' said Dai-yu. 'Even if Uncle *does* call for you, you can always say that Aunt Xue is keeping you. I think that old Nannie of yours has had a cup too many and is looking for a bit of excitement at our expense. She gave him a gentle nudge to encourage a more valiant spirit in him, muttering, as she did so, 'Take no notice of the old fool! Let's go on enjoying ourselves and not mind about her!'

Nannie Li knew only too well what Dai-yu was capable of.

'Now Miss Lin,' she said, 'don't you go taking his part! If *you* encourage him he's only too likely to do what you say!'

Dai-yu smiled dangerously. 'Take his part? Why should *I* want to encourage him? You are over-cautious, my dear Nannie. After all, Lady Jia often lets him drink; why should it matter if Mrs Xue lets him have a cup or two? I suppose you think he can't be trusted to drink here because Mrs Xue is not one of us?'

Nannie Li did not know whether to feel upset or amused. 'Really, Miss Lin. Some of the things you say cut sharper than a knife!'

Bao-chai could not suppress a giggle. She pinched Dai-yu's cheek playfully.

'Really, Miss Frowner, the things you say! One doesn't know whether to grind one's teeth or laugh!'

Aunt Xue laughed too.

'Don't be afraid, my boy! Heaven knows I've got little enough to offer you when you come to see me. You mustn't get upset over a small thing like this, or I shall feel quite uncomfortable. Drink as much as you like; I'll look after you! You may as well stay to supper, in any case; and even if you *do* get drunk, you can always spend the night here.' She told a maid to heat some more wine. 'There! Auntie will drink a cup or two with you, and then we shall have some supper.'

Bao-yu's spirits began to revive a bit under his aunt's encouragement.

'Keep an eye on him,' said Nannie Li to the maids. 'I'm lust going back for a few minutes to change my clothes.' Then aside to Aunt Xue she said, 'Don't let him drink too much, Mrs Xue!' and went off home.

Although two or three old women still remained after her departure, none felt very much concern for Bao-yu, and as soon as Nannie Li was out of the way they quietiy slipped off about their own concerns, leaving, of the attendants who had come with him, only two small maids, whose only anxiety was to please their young master by indulging him as much as possible.

Fortunately Aunt Xue, by exercising great tact and finesse, managed to spirit the wine away when Bao-yu had drunk only a few more cups, and to replace it with a hot, sour soup of pickled bamboo-shoots and

chicken-skin. He drank several bowls of this with great relish and then ate half a bowl of **green**-rice gruel. After that, when Bao-chai and Dai-yu had finished eating, he drank several cups of very strong tea. At this point Aunt Xue felt sure that he would be all right.

As Snowgoose and the other maids had now finished supper too and were once more in attendance, Dai-yu asked Bao-yu if he was ready to go. He looked at her blearily through tired eyes.

'If you want to go, I will go with you.'

Dai-yu rose to her feet. 'We really ought to go. We've been here practically all day!'

The two of them began saying their good-byes.

A maid came forward with Bao-yu's rain-hat and he lowered his head slightly for her to put it on. Holding the brim of the great saucer-shaped **red** felt top, she jerked it up and prepared to bring it down, aiming the inside part at his crown.

'Stop!' he cried impatiently.' You have got to go easy with a great clumsy thing like that! Haven't you ever seen anyone putting one of these things on before? You had better let me do it myself.'

'Come here!' said Dai-yu standing on the edge of the kang. 'I'll put it on for you!'

Bao-yu went and stood in front of her. Putting her two hands round the inner cap, Dai-yu eased it gently down until its rim fitted over his golden headband, so that the walnut-sized **red** woollen pompom of the headband was left quivering outside the cap on its flexible golden stem.

'There!' she said, after a few further adjustments. 'Now you can put on your cape.'

Bao-yu took the cape from his maid and fastened it himself.

'The nurses who came with you are still not back,' said Aunt Xue. 'Perhaps you had better wait a bit.'

'*We* wait for *them?'* said Bao-yu. 'We have got the maids. We shall be all right.'

But Aunt Xue was not satisfied, and ordered two of her own women to see the cousins home.

As soon as they were back they thanked the women for their trouble and went straight in to see Grandmother Jia, who had not yet had her supper. She was delighted to learn that they had been with Aunt Xue, and observing that Bao-yu, had had more than a little to drink, she told him to go and rest in his room and not come out again, and instructed the servants to keep a careful watch over him. Remembering which servants usually attended him, she asked what had become of Nannie Li. The maids dared not tell her the truth, which was that she had gone home.

'I think she must have had something to do,' said one of them. 'She came in when we did just now, but went Out again almost immediately.'

'Why worry about her ?' said Bao-yu over his shoulder, swaying slightly as he made his way to the bedroom. 'She's better looked after than you are! If it weren't for her I might live a few days longer!'

Inside his room he found a writing-brush and ink laid out on the desk. Skybright was the first to greet him.

'You're a nice one!' she said. 'You made me mix all this ink for you this morning, sat down in a state of great enthusiasm, wrote lust three characters, threw down the brush again, rushed out, and left me waiting here all day for you to come back and finish. Now you just sit down here and use this ink up, and perhaps I'll let the matter pass!'

Skybright's words awoke in Bao-yu a recollection of the morning's events.

'What became of the three characters I wrote?'

Skybright laughed. 'You're really drunk, aren't you! This morning before you went to the other house you gave careful instructions that they were to be pasted up over the outside door. I was afraid that someone else might make a mess of it' so I got up on a ladder and spent half the morning sticking them up myself. My hands

are still numb from doing it.'

'I'd forgotten.' Bao-yu smiled. 'If your hands are cold, I'll warm them for you.' He took both her hands in his own and led her outside to inspect the sheet of calligraphy newly pasted up over the doorway. Just then Dai-yu arrived.

'I want you to tell me honestly, cousin,' said Bao-yu. 'Which of these three characters do you think is the best?'

Dai-yu looked up at the three characters above the door:

RED RUE STUDY

'They are all equally good. I didn't know you could write so beautifully. You must do one for me some time!'

'You're just saying that to humour me,' said Bao-yu. 'Where is Aroma?' he asked Skybright.

Skybright shot out her lips and indicated the kang inside, on which Aroma, fully clothed, was lying fast asleep.

'Just look at that!' said Bao-yu with a laugh. 'It's a bit early for sleep, isn't it?'

He turned once more to Skybright. 'When I was having lunch at the other house today there was a plate of bean-cur'd dumplings. I remembered how fond you are of those things and asked Mrs Zhen if I could have some to eat in the evening. She had them sent over for me. Did you get them all right?'

'Don't talk to me about those dumplings!' said Skybright.

> 'As soon as they arrived I realized that they must be for me, but as I'd only just finished eating, I put them on one side meaning to eat them later. Then after a while Nannie Li came in and caught sight of them. "I don't expect Bao-yu will want these," she said. "I think I'll take them for my grand children"; and she had them sent round to her house.'

While Skybright was talking, Snow**pink** came in carrying some tea on a tray. Bao-yu invited Dai-yu to have some, to the great merriment of the maids, who pointed out that she had slipped away some minutes before.

After drinking about half a cupful, Bao-yu suddenly thought of the tea he had drunk early that morning.

'When you made that Fung Loo this morning,' he said to Snow**pink**, 'I remember telling you that with that particular brand the full flavour doesn't come Out until after three or four waterings. Why have you given me this other stuff? This would have been just the time to have the Fung Loo.'

'I *was* keeping it for you,' said Snow**pink**, 'but Nannie Li came and drank it all.'

With a flick of the wrist Bao-yu hurled the cup he was holding on to the floor, where it smashed noisily, breaking into innumerable pieces and showering Snow**pink**'s skirt with hot tea. He jumped angrily to his feet.

'Is she your mistress that you should all treat her with such reverence? Merely because I drank her milk for a few days when I was a baby she is as spoiled and pampered as though she were some sort of divinity. Let's get rid of the old woman now and have done with it!'

And he strode off without more ado to tell Grandmother Jia that he wanted his old nurse dismissed.

All this time Aroma had been Only pretending to sleep, hoping by this means to engage Bao-yu's attention and provoke some coquetry between them. As long as the talk dwelt on calligraphy and Skybright's dumplings there seemed no pressing need for her to get up; but when she heard him break a teacup and grow really angry she hurriedly rose to her feet and intervened to restrain him.

By this time someone had arrived from Grandmother Jia's room to inquire what all the noise was about.

Aroma pretended that she had smashed the cup herself by slipping on some snow while fetching tea. Having disposed of the inquirer, she then proceeded to exhort Bao-yu.

'Dismiss her by all means, if you really want to! But we could all like to leave with her; so while you are about it, why not make a clean sweep and dismiss the lot of us? I am sure you will find plenty of other good servants to replace us with.'

Bao-yu had nothing to say to this, and Aroma and the rest helped him onto the kang and started undressing him. He kept trying to tell them something as they did so, but an object seemed to impede his tongue and his eyelids were growing increasingly hot and heavy. Soon the maids had him lying down between covers. Aroma took off the 'Magic jade', wrapped it in a piece of silk, and slipped it under the quilt, so that it should not be cold on his neck the next morning. By this time Bao-yu was already asleep, having dropped off as soon as his head touched the pillow.

While this was going on, Nannie Li and the other old women had arrived back at last. Learning that Bao-yu was drunk, they dared not approach him and soon went off again, having satisfied themselves by whispered exchanges that he was safely asleep.

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Bao-yu awoke next morning to hear someone announcing that 'Master Rong from the other house' had brought Qin Zhong over to pay his respects. Bao-yu hurried out to receive them and conducted Qin Zhong into the presence of Grandmother Jia. Observing that Qin Zhong's good looks and gentle demeanour admirably qualified him to become Bao-yu's study-companion, Grandmother Jia was pleased, and made him stay for tea and then dinner, after which she sent him to be introduced to Lady Wang and the rest. Everybody loved Qin-shi and was delighted to meet this charming younger brother, and there were First Meeting presents from everybody waiting for him when he left. Grandmother Jia's was an embroidered purse enclosing a little God of Literature in solid gold to signify that literary success was in the bag'.

'Since your home is so far away,' she said to Qin Zhong as he was leaving, 'the weather may sometimes make it inconvenient for you to go back at night. In that case, do please stay here with us! And mind that you always keep with your Uncle Bao and don't go getting into mischief with those young ragamuffins at the school!'

Qin Zhong received these admonitions with deference and then went home to report on the day's events to his father.

Qin Zhong's father, Qin Bang-ye, was one of the Secretaries in the Public Buildings Department of the Board of Works and a man in his middle sixties. He had lost his wife early, and finding himself still childless at the age of fifty, had adopted a boy and a girl from an orphanage. The boy had died, leaving only the girl Ke-er, or 'Ke-qing' as she was more elegantly renamed, who had grown up into an extremely charming and vivacious young woman and been married into the Jia family, with whom her adoptive father had long had a connection.

Qin Bang-ye fathered Qin Zhong when he was fifty-three and the boy was now twelve years old. His tutor had returned south the year before, and he had been revising old lessons at home ever since. Qin Bang-ye had himself been on the point of speaking to his daughter's in-laws about the possibility of getting Qin Zhong admitted into the Jia clan school as an external scholar when the happy accident of Qin Zhong's meeting with Bao-yu occurred. Bang-ye knew of Jia Dai-ru, the master in charge of the school, as one of the leading elder scholars of the day, under whose tutelage there would be every hope of Qin Zhong's making rapid strides in his education and eventually obtaining an advancement. He was therefore delighted that the matter had been so easily

concluded.

There was only one difficulty. Knowing the sort of style in which the Jias lived, Bang-ye realized that he would have to dip deeply into his pocket, and his official salary left that pocket only meagrely supplied. However, since this was a matter which concerned the whole future of his son, there was nothing for it but to strain his credit to the utmost. By borrowing a bit here and a bit there he was able to get together a sum of twenty-four taels of silver which he made up into a packet and laid reverently before Jia Dai-ru when he took Qin Zhong to the old teacher's house to make his kotow. Nothing now remained but for Bao-yu to choose an auspicious day on which the two of them could begin school together.

Their entry into the school was the occasion of a tumultuous incident of which an account will be given in the following chapter.

CHAPTER 9

A son is admonished and Li Gui receives
an alarming warning
A pupil is abused and Tealeaf throws the
classroom in an uproar

In the last chapter we left Qin Bang-ye and his son waiting for a message from the Jia household to tell them when Qin Zhong was to begin school. Bao-yu was impatient to see Qin Zhong again and sent word to say that it was to be the day after next.

When the appointed day arrived, Bao-yu rose in the morning to find that Aroma had already got his books, brushes and other writing materials ready for him and was sitting disconsolately on the side of his bed. Seeing him get up, she roused herself and helped him to do his hair and wash. He asked her the cause of her despondency.

'What's upset you this time, Aroma? I can't believe you are worried about being left alone while I am at school.'

'Of course not!' said Aroma with a laugh. Learning is a very good thing. Without it you would fritter all your life away and never get anywhere. I only hope that you'll see to it that you *are* learning when you are meant to be and that, when you are not, you will be thinking about home and not getting into scrapes with the other boys; because then you would be in *real* trouble with your father. And though you talk a lot about the need for effort and self4mprovement, it would really be better to do too little work than too much. For one thing you don't want to bite off more than you can chew; and for another you don't want your health to suffer. At least, that's how it seems to me, so you mustn't mind my saying so.'

Each time Aroma paused, Bao-yu answered 'Yes' or 'No'. She continued:

'I have packed your big fur gown for the pages to take. Mind you put it on if you find it cold at the school. It won't be like here, where there is always someone else to think of these things for you. I've also given them your foot-warmer and your hand-warmer. You'll have to see that they give the charcoal a stir from time to time. They're such a lazy pack of good-for-nothings, they'll be only too pleased to do nothing if you don't stand over them. You could freeze to death for all they cared.'

'Don't worry!' said Bao-yu. 'I know how to do it myself. And don't go getting gloomy, all of you, cooped up here while I am away. Try to spend as much time as you can with my Cousin Lin.'

His dressing was now completed and Aroma urged him to begin his visits to Grandmother Jia, Jia Zheng and Lady Wang. After a few parting instructions to Skybright and Musk, he went off to his grandmother's,

where he had to listen to more admonitions, then on to Lady Wang's, and then outside to the study to see his father, Jia Zheng.

Jia Zheng was in conversation with his literary gentlemen when Bao-yu entered the room and made his salutation. Hearing him announce that he was off to school to resume his studies, Jia Zheng smiled sarcastically.

'I think you had better not use that word "studies" again in my hearing, unless you want to make me blush for you. In my opinion you might just as well be left to fool around as before, since that is all you seem fit for. At all events, I don't want you here. I find your presence in a place like this contaminating.'

The literary gentlemen rose to their feet with nervous laughter.

'Come, come, Sir Zheng! You are too hard on him! Two or three years from now our young friend will be carrying all before him! He has left his old, childish ways behind him now –haven't you boy? Quite reformed. Comet'—dtwo of the older men took Bao-yu by the hands and hurried him from the room—'I am sure it must be time now for your breakfast. To breakfast I To breakfast!'

Jia Zheng asked who was in attendance on Bao-yu. There was a ringing 'Sir!' from outside, and three or four strapping fellows entered the study and saluted Manchu fashion. Jia Zheng recognized the foremost one as Li Gui, the son of Bao-yu's old wet-nurse) Nannie Li, and addressed himself to *him.*

'You have attended Bao-yu during all his lessons in the past. What precisely has he been doing? Stuffing his head with worthless nonsense and acquiring a fine new stock of knavish tricks) I shouldn't wonder! Wait until I have a little time to spare: I'll have your hide off first and then settle accounts with that good-for-nothing son of mine!'

'Sir!'

Li Gui sank terrified to his knees, snatched off his cap, and knocked the ground several times with his forehead.

'Master Bao has read the first three books of the *Poetry Classic,* sir, up to the part that goes

Hear the happy bleeding deer
Grousing in the vagrant meads…

That's the truth, sir. I wouldn't tell a lie.'

This novel version of the well-known lines provoked a roar of laughter from the literary gentlemen. Even Jia Zheng could not restrain a smile,

'If he read *thirty* books of the *Poetry Classic,'* said Jia Zheng, 'it would still be tomfoolery. No doubt he hopes to deceive others with this sort of thing, but he does not deceive me. Give my compliments to the Headmaster and tell him from me that r want none of this trifling with the *Poetry Classic* or any other ancient literature. It is of the utmost importance that he should thoroughly understand and learn by heart the whole *Four Books* before he attempts anything else.'

'Sir!'

Seeing that Jia Zheng had nothing more to say, Li Gui and the other servants rose to their feet again and withdrew.

All this time Bao-yu had been waiting for them in the courtyard outside, scarcely daring to breathe. As they came out, dusting their knees, Li Gui said,

'Did you hear that, young master? "Have my hide off first" he said. Some people's servants are respected for their masters sakes, but not us. All we get is beatings and hard words. So spare a thought for us in future, will you?'

'Don't be upset, old chap!' said Bao-yu. Tomorrow I'll treat you all.'

'Little ancestor,' Li Gui replied, 'nobody's looking for treats. All we ask is that once in a while—just once in a while—you should do what you are told.'

They were now back at Grandmother Jia's apartment. Qin Zhong had already arrived and was engaged in conversation with the old lady. As soon as the two friends had greeted each other they took their leave.

Bao-yu suddenly remembered that he had not yet seen Dai-yu and hurried to her room to say good-bye. He found her by the window making herself up at the mirror. Her answer to his announcement that he was off to begin school was smiling but perfunctory:

'Good. I wish you every success. I'm sorry I can't see you off.'

'Wait till I get back and have had my supper, cousin,' said Bao-yu, 'and I will give you a hand with that rouge.'

He chatted with her for quite a bit longer before finally tearing himself away. As he was going she suddenly called after him so that he stopped:

'Aren't you going to say good-bye to your cousin Bao-chai?'

Bao-yu smiled but said nothing and went straight off to school with Qin Zhong.

*

The Jia clan school was situated at no great distance from Rong-guo House. It was a charitable foundation which had been established many years previously by the founder of the family and was designed for the sons and younger brothers of those members of the clan who could not afford to pay for private tuition. All members of the clan holding official posts were expected to contribute towards its expenses and members of advanced years and known integrity were chosen to be its masters. As soon as Bao-yu and Qin Zhong arrived they were introduced to the other students and then set to work at once on their lessons.

From now on the two friends were inseparable) arriving at school and leaving school together and sitting beside each other in class. Grandmother Jia herself became very fond of Qin Zhong. She was always having him to stay for three or four nights at a time and treated him exactly as if he were one of her own great-grandchildren. And because she realized that his family was not very well off, she frequently helped Out with clothes and the like. Within a month or two he was a familiar and accepted member of the Rong household.

Bao-yu had always been impatient of social conventions, preferring to let sentiment rather than convention dictate the terms of his relationships. It was this which now prompted him to make Qin Zhong the following proposal:

'You and I are schoolmates and pretty much the same age. Let us in future forget all this "uncle" "nephew" business and address each other exactly like friends or brothers!'

Qin Zhong was at first too timid to comply; but as Bao-yu persisted and went on calling him 'brother' or 'Jing-qing' (which was his school-name) whenever he spoke to him, Qin Zhong himself gradually fell into the habit of addressing Bao-yu as an equal.

All the pupils at the clan school were either members of the Jia clan or relations by marriage; but as the proverb rightly says, 'there are nine kinds of dragon and no two kinds are alike'. Where many are gathered together the wheat is sure to contain a certain amount of chaff; and this school was no exception in numbering some very ill-bred persons among its pupils.

The two new boys, Qin Zhong and Bao-yu, were both as beautiful as flowers; the other scholars observed how shrinking and gentle Qin Zhong was, blushing almost before you spoke to him and timid and bashful as a girl; they saw in Bao-yu one whom nature and habit had made humble and accommodating in spite of his social position, always willing to defer to others in the interest of harmony; they observed his affectionate disposition and familiar manner of speech; and they could see that the two friends were devoted to each other. Perhaps it is not to be wondered at that these observations should have given rise to certain suspicions in the minds of those ill-bred persons, and that both in school and out of it all kinds of ugly rumours should have

circulated behind their backs.

When Xue Pan learned, some time after moving into his aunt's place in the capital, that the establishment included a clan school plentifully stocked with young males of a certain age, his old enthusiasm for 'Lord Long-yang's vice' was reawakened, and he had hastened to register himself as a pupil. His school-going was, needless to say, a pretence—'one day fishing and two days to dry the nets' as they say—and had nothing to do with the advancement of learning. Having paid a generous fee to Jia Dai-ru, he used his membership of the school merely as a means of picking up 'soul-mates' from among his fellow-students. It must with regret be recorded that a surprisingly large number of the latter were deluded into becoming his willing victims by the prospect of receiving those ample advances of money and goods which he was in a position to offer.

Among them were two amorous young creatures whose names and parentage escape us but who, because of their glamorous looks and affected manners, were universally known by the nicknames of 'Darling' and 'Precious'. Although their fellow-students much admired them and entertained towards them feelings not at all conducive to that health of mind which the Young Person should at all times endeavour to cultivate, they were deterred from meddling with them for fear of what Xue Pan might do.

When Qin Zhong and Bao-yu joined the school it was only to be expected that they too should fall under the spell of this charming pair; but like the rest they were inhibited from overt declaration of their feelings by the knowledge that Xue Pan was their 'friend'. Their feelings were reciprocated by Darling and Precious, and a bond of mutual attraction grew up between the four, which nevertheless remained unexpressed, except for the significant looks that every day passed between them across the classroom, or the occasional rather too loud utterance to a neighbour of some remark really intended for the ears of the opposite pair.

They were persuaded that these cryptic communications had escaped the notice of their fellows; but they were wrong. Certain young hooligans among their classmates had long since discerned the true nature of what was going on, and while the two handsome couples were engaged in their silent and (as they thought) secret communion, these others would be winking and leering behind their backs or becoming suddenly convulsed with paroxysms of artificial coughing.

It happened that one day Jia Dai-ru was called home on business and left the class with the first half of a fourteen word couplet to complete, telling them that he would be back on the morrow to take them over the next passage in their reading and putting his eldest grandson Jia Rui in charge of the school during his absence. Xue Pan had by now stopped coming in even for roll-call, and so on this occasion he too was out of the way. The opportunity was too good to miss, and Qin Zhong and Darling, after a preliminary exchange of glances, both asked to be excused and went round to the rear courtyard to converse.

'Does your father mind what friends you have?' Qin Zhong had got no further than this question when there was a cough behind them. The two boys spun round and saw that it came from their classmate 'Jokey' Jin. Darling had a somewhat impetuous nature which now, fired by a mixture of anger and shame, caused him to round sharply on the intruder.

'What's that cough supposed to mean? Aren't we allowed to talk if we want to?'

Jokey Jin leered: 'If you're allowed to talk, aren't I allowed to cough if I want to? What I'd like to know is, if you've got something to say to each other, why can't you say it out openly? Why all this guilty secrecy? But what's the good of pretending? It's a fair cop. You let me in on your game and I won't say anything. Otherwise there'll be trouble!'

With furious blushes the other two protested indignantly that they did not know what he was talking about.

Jokey Jin grinned. 'Caught you in the act, didn't I?' He began to clap his hands and chant in a loud, guffawing voice,

'Bum-cake!

Bum-cake!
Let's all have a
Bit to eat!'

Angry and indignant, Qin Zhong and Darling hurried back into the classroom and complained to Jia Ruj that Jokey Jin was persecuting them.

This Jia Rui was a spineless, unprincipled character who, as *a* means of obliging the boys to treat him, always displayed the most shameless favouritism in his settlement of class-room disputes. In return for money, drinks, and dinners, he had lately given Xue Pan a free hand in his nefarious activities—had, indeed, not only refrained from interfering with him, but even 'aided the tyrant in his tyranny'.

Now Xue Pan was very inconstant in his affections, always blowing east one day and west the next. He had recently abandoned Darling and Precious in favour of some newly discovered sweetheart, lust as previously he had abandoned Jokey *Jin* in favour of Darling and Precious. It followed that in this present confrontation Jia Rui, to his chagrin, could not hope to gain any rewards by the exercise of his usual partiality. Instead of blaming this vexatious state of affairs on Xue Pan's fickleness, however, he directed all his resentment against Darling and Precious, for whom he felt the same unreasonable jealousy as motivated Jokey Jin and the rest.

Qin Zhong's and Darling's complaint at first put Jia Rui in somewhat of a quandary, for he dared not openly rebuke Qin Zhong. He could, however, give his resentment outlet by making an example of Darling; so instead of dealing with his complaint, he told him that he was a trouble-maker and followed this up with so savage a dressing-down that even Qin Zhong went back to his seat humiliated and crestfallen.

Jokey Jin, now thoroughly cock-a-hoop, wagged his head and tutted in a most provoking manner and addressed wounding remarks to no one in particular, which greatly upset Darling and Precious for whose ears they were intended. A furious muttered altercation broke out between them across the intervening desks. Jokey Jin insisted that he had caught Qin Zhong and Darling *in flagrante delicto.*

'I ran into them in the back courtyard, kissing each other and feeling arses as plain as anything. I tell you they had it all worked out. They were just measuring themselves for size before getting down to business.'

Reckless in his hour of triumph, he made these wild allegations, unmindful of who might hear them. But one heroic soul was moved to mighty anger by his wanton words. This was Jia Qiang, a member of the Ning-guo branch of the family of the same generation as Jia Rong. He had lost both his parents when a small child and been brought up by Cousin Zhen. At sixteen he was even more handsome and dashing than Jia Rong and the two youths were inseparable friends.

Any establishment as large as the Ning household always contains a few disgruntled domestics who specialize in traducing their masters, and a number of disagreeable rumours concerning Jia Qiang did in fact begin to circulate among the servants which seem to have reached the ears of Cousin Zhen, for, partly in self-defence (since they involved him too), he moved Jia Qiang out of the house and set him up in a small establishment of his own somewhere in the city.

Jia Qiang possessed a very shrewd brain under his dazzlingly handsome exterior His attendance at the school, however, was no more than a blind to his other activities, principal among which were cock-fighting, dog-racing, and botanizing excursions into the Garden of Pleasure; but with a doting Cousin Zhen to protect him on the one hand and Jia Rong to aid and comfort him on the other, there was no one in the clan who dared thwart him in anything he did.

Since Qin Zhong was the brother-in-law of his best friend, Jia Qiang was naturally unwilling to stand by and see him abused in so despiteful a manner without doing anything to help. On the other hand he reflected that there would be certain disadvantages In coming forward as his champion.

'Jokey Jin, Jia Rui, and that lot are all friends of Uncle Xue,' he thought. 'For that matter, I'm a friend of Uncle Xue myself. If I openly stick up for Qin Zhong and they go and tell old Xue, it'll make things rather

awkward between us. On the other hand, if I don't interfere at all, Jokey Jin's rumours are going to get quite out of hand. This calls for a stratagem of some kind which will shut the little beast up without causing too much embarrassment afterwards.'

Having thought of a plan, he pretended that he wanted to be excused, and slipping round to the back, quietly called over Bao-yu's little page Tealeaf and whispered a few inflammatory words in his ear.

Tealeaf was the most willing but also the youngest and least sensible of Bao-yu's pages. Jia Qiang told him how Jokey Jin had been bullying Qin Zhong. 'And even Bao-yu came in for a share,' he said. 'If we don't take this Jin fellow down a peg, next time he is going to be quite insufferable.'

Tealeaf never needed any encouragement to pick a fight, and now, inflamed by Jia Qiang's message and open incitement to action, he marched straight into the classroom to look for Jokey Jin. And there was no 'Master Jin' when he saw him, either: it was 'Jin! Who do you think you are?'

At this point Jia Qiang began to scrape his boots on the floor and make a great business of straightening his clothes and glancing out of the window at the sky, muttering to himself as he did so, 'Ah, yes. Hmn. Must be about time.' Going up to Jia Rui, he informed him that he had an engagement which necessitated his leaving early, and Jia Rui not having the courage to stop him, allowed him to slip away.

Tealeaf had by now singled out Jokey Jin and grabbed him by the front of his jacket.

'Whether we fuck arseholes or not,' he said, 'what fucking business is it of yours? You should be bloody grateful we haven't fucked your dad. Come outside and fight it out with me, if you've got any spunk in you!'

'Tealeaf!' Jia Rui shouted agitatedly. 'You are not to use such language in here!'

Jokey Jin's face turned pale with anger.

'This is mutiny! I don't have to take this sort of thing from a slave. I shall see your master about this' - and he shook himself free of Tealeaf and made for Bao-yu, intending to seize and belabour him.

As Qin Zhong turned to watch the onslaught, he heard a rushing noise behind his head and a square inkstone launched by an unseen hand sailed past it and landed on the desk occupied by Jia Lan and Jia Jun.

Jia Lan and Jia Jun belonged to the Rong-guo half of the clan and were in the same generation as the other Jia Lan, the little son of Li Wan and nephew of Bao-yu. Jia Jun had lost his father in infancy and was doted on by his widowed mother. Jia Lan was his best friend, which is why they always sat next to each other in school. Though Jia Jun was among the youngest in the class, his tiny body contained an heroic soul. He was extremely mischievous and completely fearless. With the impartial interest of an observer he had watched a friend of Jokey Jin's slyly aim the inkstone at Tealeaf; but when it fell short and landed right in front of him on his own desk, smashing a porcelain water-bottle and showering his books with inky water, his blood was up.

'Rotten swine!' he shouted. 'If this is a free-for-all, here goes!' and he grabbed at the inkstone intending to send it sailing back. But Jia Lan was a man of peace and held it firmly down.

'Leave it, old chap! It's none of our business,' he counselled.

Jia Jun was not to be restrained, however. Deprived of the inkstone, he picked up a satchel full of books and raising it in both hands above his head, hurled it in the direction of the assailant. Unfortunately his body was too small and his strength too puny for so great a trajectory, and the satchel fell on the desk occupied by Bao-yu and Qin Zhong. It landed with a tremendous crash, scattering books, papers, writing-brushes and inkstones in all directions and smashing Bao-yu's teabowl to smithereens so that tea flowed over everything round about. Nothing daunted, Jia Jun leaped out and rushed upon the thrower of inkstones to smite him.

Meanwhile Jokey Jin had found a bamboo pole which he flailed around him: a terrible weapon in so confined and crowded a space. Soon Tealeaf had sustained a blow from it and was bawling for reinforcements from outside. There were three other pages in attendance on Bao-yu besides himself, all equally inclined to mischief. Their names were Sweeper, Ploughboy and Inky. With a great. shout of 'To arms! To arms! Down with the bastards!' these three now came rushing like angry hornets into the classroom, Inky wielding a door-bar which he had picked up and Sweeper and Ploughboy brandishing horsewhips.

Jia Rui, in a frenzy of outraged authority, hopped from one to the other, alternately grabbing and cajoling, but none would take the slightest bit of notice. Disorder was now general. The more mischievous of the scholars mingled glee-fully in the fray, safe, in the general scrimmage, to land punches at chosen foes without fear of discovery or reprisal. The more timid crawled into places of safety. Others stood on their desks, laughing and clapping their hands and cheering on the combatants. The classroom was like a cauldron of still water that had suddenly come to the boil.

Li Gui and the other older servants, hearing the uproar from outside, now hurried in, and by concerted shouting eventually managed to call the boys to a halt. Li Gui asked them what they were fighting about. He was answered by a medley of voices, some saying one thing and some another. Unable to make sense of what he heard, he turned his attention to Tealeaf and the other pages, cursing them roundly and turning them out of the room.

Qin Zhong had fallen an early victim to Jokey Jin's pole, sustaining a nasty graze on the head which Bao-yu was at this very moment mopping with the flap of his gown. Seeing that Li Gui had succeeded in restoring some kind of order, he asked to be taken away.

'Pack up my books, Li Gui, and fetch the horse, will you? I am going to tell Great-uncle Dai-ru about this. We were shamefully insulted, and because we didn't want to start a quarrel, we went along in a perfectly polite and reasonable manner and reported the matter to Cousin Rui. But instead of doing anything about it, he gave *us* a telling-off, stood by while someone called us filthy names, and actually *encouraged* them to start hitting us. Naturally Tealeaf stuck up for us when he saw we were being bullied. What would you expect him to do? But they all ganged up on him and started hitting *him*, and even Qin Zhong's head was cut open. We can't go on studying here after this.'

Li Gui tried to calm him.

'Don't be hasty, young master! Your great-uncle has gone home on business and if we go running after him to pester him about a little thing like this, he'll think we don't know how to behave. If you want my advice, the proper way to settle this affair is by dealing with it here, where it started. Not by rushing off and upsetting your poor old uncle.' He turned to Jia Rui. 'This is all your fault, Mr Rui, sir. While your granfer is away you are the head of the whole school and everyone looks to you to set an example. If anyone does anything they shouldn't, it's up to you to deal with it—give them a hiding, or whatever it is they need. Not sit by and let matters get Out of hand to this extent.'

'I *did* tell them to stop,' said Jia Rui, 'but they wouldn't listen.'

'If you don't mind my saying so,' said Li Gui, 'it's because you've been to blame yourself on past occasions that these lads won't do what you tell them to now. So if this business today does get to the ears of your grandfather, you'll be in trouble yourself, along of all the rest. If I were you, sir, I should think of some way of sorting this out as quickly as possible.'

'Sort it out nothing!' said Bao-yu. 'I'm definitely going to report this.'

'If Jokey Jin stays here,' wailed Qin Zhong tearfully, 'I'm not studying in this school any longer.'

'There is no earthly reason to talk about leaving this school,' said Bao-yu. 'We have as much right to come here as anyone else. When I've explained to everyone exactly what happened, Jokey Jin will be expelled.

'Who is this Jokey Jin, any way?' he asked Li Gui.

Li Gui thought for a moment.

'Better not ask. If I told you, it would only make for more unpleasantness.'

Tealeaf's voice piped up from outside the window:

'He's the nephew of Mrs Huang on the Ning-guo side. Trash like that trying to scare us! I know your Auntie Huang, Jokey Jin! She's an old scrounger. I've seen her down on her knees in front of our Mrs Lian, begging for stuff so that she could go out and pawn it. What an aunt! I'd be ashamed to own an aunt like that!'

Li Gui shouted at him furiously.

‘Detestable little varmint! Trust you to know the answer and spread your poison!’

Bao-yu sniffed contemptuously.

‘So that’s who he is! The nephew of Cousin Huang’s wife. I’ll go and speak to *her* about this.’

He wanted to go straight away, and called to Tealeaf to come inside and pack up his books.

‘No need for you to go, Master Bao,’ said Tealeaf as he swaggered in triumphantly to do his bidding. ‘Let me go for you and save you the trouble. I’ll just say that Lady Jia wants a word with her, hire a carriage, and bring her along myself. Then you can question her in front of Lady Jia.’

Li Gui was furious.

‘Do you want to die? If you’re not careful, my lad, when we get home I’ll first thrash the living daylights out of you and then tell Sir Zheng and Lady Wang that Master Bao was put up to all this by your provocation. I’ve had trouble enough as it is trying to get these lads calmed down a bit without needing any fresh trouble from you. It was all of your making, this rumpus, in the first place. But instead of thinking about ways of damping it down, you have to go throwing more fat on the fire.’

After this outburst Tealeaf was at last silent.

Jia Rui was by now terrified lest the matter should go any further and his own far from clean record be brought to light. Fear made him abject. Addressing Qin Zhong and Bao-yu in turn, ‘he humbly begged them not to report it. At first they were adamant. Then Bao-yu made a condition:

‘All right, we won’t tell. But you must make Jokey Jin apologize.’

At first Jokey Jin refused, but Jia Rui was insistent, and Li Gui added his own persuasion:

‘After all, it started with you, so if you don’t do what they say, how are we ever going to end it?’

Under their combined pressure Jokey Jin’s resistance at last gave way and he locked hands and made Qin Zhong a bow. But Bao-yu said this was not enough. He insisted on a kotow. Jia Rui, whose only concern now was to get the matter over with as quickly as possible, quietly urged him to comply:

‘You know what the proverb says:

He who can check the moment’s rage
Shall calm and carefree end his days.’

Did Jokey Jin comply? The following chapter will reveal.

CHAPTER 10

Widow Jin’s self-iinterest gets the better of her
righteous indignation
And Doctor Zhang’s diagnosis reveals the origin
of a puzzling disease

Outnumbered, and hard pressed by Jia Rui to apologize, Jokey Jin made a kotow to Qin Zhong, whereupon Bao-yu agreed to let the matter drop. Back in his own home, when school was over, he brooded with mounting anger on his humiliation.

‘Qin Zhong is Jia Rong’s brother-in-law: it’s not as if he were one of the Jia clan. He’s only an external scholar, the same as me; and it’s only because he is friends with Bao-yu that he can afford to be so high and mighty. Well, in that case he ought to behave himself, then no one would have any cause to complain. But he’s always carrying on in such a sneaky, underhand way with Bao-yu, as though he thought the rest of us were all blind and couldn’t see what he was up to. And now today he’s started making up to someone else and I happen to have found him out. So what if there *were* a row about this? I’ve got nothing to be afraid of.’

His mother, Widow Jin, overheard his muttering.

‘What have you been getting up to this time ?’ she asked. ‘Look at the job we had getting you into that school. All the talks I had with your aunt and the trouble she went to to see Mrs Lian about it. Suppose we hadn’t had their help in getting you in there, we could never have afforded a tutor. What’s more, you get free tea and free dinners there, don’t you? That has meant a big saving for us during the two years you have been going there. And you’re glad enough to have something decent to wear out of the money saved, aren’t you? And another thing. If you hadn’t been going to that school, how would you ever have met that Mr Xue of yours? Between seventy and eighty taels of silver we’ve had out of him during this past year. I can tell you this, my boy. If you get yourself thrown out of there, you needn’t think you can get in anywhere else, because you could easier fly to the moon than find another place like that. Now you just play quietly for a bit and then go to bed like a good boy!’

Thus admonished, Jokey Jin swallowed his anger and fell silent. Before long he went to bed and to sleep, and next day was back at the school again as usual. Of him no more.

*

Jokey Jin’s aunt was married to one Jia Huang, a member of the Jia clan in the same generation as Cousin Zhen and Jia Lian. It goes without saying, of course, that not all members of the clan lived in the sort of style maintained by the Ning and Rong households. Jia Huang and his wife had only the income from a very small property to live on, and it was only by dint of frequent visits to the Ning and Rong mansions, where their flattering attentions on Wang Xifeng and You-shi earned them an occasional subsidy, that they were able to make ends meet.

Today the weather was fine and sunny and Mrs Huang had nothing particular to do at home, so taking an old serving-woman with her, she got into a cab and went off to pay a call on her sister-in-law and nephew.

In the course of conversation Widow Jin soon got on to the subject of yesterday’s affair in the schoolroom and launched into a full account, from which no detail was omitted, of all those happenings. It would have been as well for her if she had not done so, for the effect was to kindle a dangerous anger in the bosom of her sister-in-law.

‘That little beast Qin Zhong!’ said Mrs Huang. ‘He may be related to the Jias, by marriage, but then so is your boy. What business has he to go throwing his weight about like that, I should like to know? Especially after the disgusting things he had been doing himself. Considering what he’d been up to, even Bao-yu ought not to have sided with him to that extent. Let me go and see Mrs Zhen about this. I shall ask her to let me have it out with Qin Zhong’s sister and see if we can’t get some satisfaction.’

‘Oh dear, I shouldn’t talk so much! I never meant to tell you this. Please, my dear, I beg of you not to speak to them about it! Never mind the rights and wrongs of the case, if this all gets out, they will make it too hot for my boy to stay on at the school; and if he had to stop going to the school, we should never be able to afford a tutor for him, quite apart from all the extra expense I should have of feeding him during the day.’

‘Never mind about all that!’ said Mrs Huang. ‘We’ll worry about that after I’ve spoken to them and seen what happens.’

Dismissing her sister-in-law’s entreaties, she sent the old servant-woman out for a cab, and getting inside, drove straight off to the Ning-guo mansion. But by the time she had reached it, driven in at the east end gate, dismounted from the carriage and gone in to see You-shi, the edge had already worn off her anger, and it was only after deferential inquiries about the health and comfort of her hostess and various other in-consequential matters that she got around to asking what had become of Qin-shi, who was usually in evidence during her visits.

‘I don’t know what’s the matter with her lately,’ said You-shi. ‘It’s been more than two months now since she had a period, yet the doctors say she isn’t pregnant. And during the last few days she’s been getting so tired and listless in the afternoons: doesn’t feel like doing anything; doesn’t even feel like talking; all the spirit seems to have gone Out of her. I’ve said to her, “Never mind about wifely duties. Just forget about the morning and

evening visits and concentrate on getting better. Even when relations call," I said, "I can see to them myself. And never mind what the older members of the family might say: I'll do all the explaining for you." I've spoken to Rong, as well. "You're not to tire her out," I told him, "and you're not to let her get upset! She must just rest quietly for a few days and look after herself. And if there's anything she fancies to eat, just come to my apartment to get it. Because if anything should happen to her," I said, "you wouldn't find another wife like that, with her looks and her good nature, if you took a lantern to look for her." She's such a sweet person, there isn't anyone among our relations or among the older members of the family who doesn't love her. I've been so worried on her account these last few days. And just to make matters worse, first thing this morning her young brother comes along—Silly little boy! he ought to have realized that his sister wasn't well and not in a condition to listen to such things, even if he'd suffered ten thousand times the injustice!—It seems that yesterday there was a fight at the school. One of the external students—I don't know which one it was—had been bullying him; and there were a lot of other very nasty things as well. So he had to go and tell all this to his sister. Well, you know how sensitive she is, my dear, in spite of the fact that she always seems so lively and full of fun to talk to. The slightest little thing can upset her and set her brooding on it for whole days and nights together. In fact, this illness has been brought on by too much worrying, I'm sure of it. Well, this morning when she heard that someone had been bullying her brother, it both upset her and at the same time made her angry. She was upset to think that those horrible boys at the school should be able to twist things round and say such terrible things about him, but she was also angry with him, because she said he must have been getting into bad ways and not giving his mind properly to his studies to have got into trouble of this sort in the first place. So of course, because of this upset she wouldn't have any breakfast. I've just been round there trying to calm her. I gave her brother a talking-to and sent him round to see Bao-yu, and I stood over her while she ate half a bowlful of bird's-nest soup. I've only just this minute got back. Oh, I'm so worried about her, my dear! We haven't got a good doctor at the moment, either. It pierces me to the heart when I think about that child's illness! I suppose *you* don't happen to know of a good doctor, do you?'

Mrs Huang's determination to have things out with Qin-shi, of which she had boasted so valiantly at her sister-in4aw's, had, in the course of this outpouring, fled to the far kingdom of Java. She hastened to own that she knew of no good doctor.

'But hearing what you have said about this illness,' she added, 'I can't help wondering if it may not after all be pregnancy. You want to be careful they don't give her the wrong treatment. If they give her the wrong treatment for *that*, there will be real trouble!'

'I know,' said You-shi. 'That's what I say.'

While they were still talking, Cousin Zhen came in from outside. 'Isn't this Cousin Huang's wife?' he asked You-shi, catching sight of the visitor. Mrs Huang dropped him a curtsey and a 'how-do-you-do'. 'You must ask our cousin to dinner,' he said, going on into the room beyond.

The original object of Mrs Huang's visit had of course been to complain to Qin-shi about Qin Zhong's treatment of her nephew. Hearing of Qin-shi's illness she had abandoned all thought of even mentioning the subject; and now that Cousin Zhen and You-shi were being so nice to her, her anger gradually gave way to pleasure, and after gossiping a while longer she went off home.

When she had gone, Cousin Zhen came in again and sat down.

'What did she come about today?' he asked You-shi.

'Oh,' said You-shi, 'nothing in particular. When she first came in she appeared to be upset about something or other, then after we'd been talking for some time and I mentioned that Rong's wife was ill, she gradually calmed down. When you invited her to dinner she knew she couldn't very well stay on with sickness in the house and left after chatting a few minutes longer. She didn't ask for anything before she went.

'But let's talk about that child's illness. The thing is, you really must find a good doctor to look at her, before it gets too late. This lot we have around the house at present are completely useless! Each one of them just

listens to what you say and then gives it back to you with a few learned words thrown in. And they're so terribly conscientious about it! We have three or four of them coming by turns every day, and sometimes they'll take her pulse four or five times in the same day. Then they have long discussions while they decide on a prescription. None of the medicine does her any good, and the only consequence of all this is that she is having to change her clothes four or five times in a day and be constantly getting up and sitting down to see these doctors, which is no good at all for a person in her condition.'

'Oh, she's a silly child!' said Cousin Zhen. 'There's no *need* for all this dressing and undressing. Suppose she caught a chill on top of this other illness, that would be really frightful. Never mind about the clothes, for goodness' sake, however good they are I It's the child's *health* that matters. Who cares if she has to have a completely new outfit every day? We can afford it.

'What I was going to tell you is that I've just had a visit from Feng Zi-ying. He noticed that something was bothering me, and when he asked me what it was I explained that our daughter4n-law isn't well and told him how worried we are because we haven't got a decent doctor who can tell us for sure whether it's pregnancy or disease, so that we don't even know how serious it is. Then Feng Zi-ying told me about a scholar friend of his called Zhang You-shi. He and Feng were at school together. He is a man of very wide learning including, apparently, an excellent knowledge of medicine and the ability to tell with certainty whether a disease is curable or not. He's up at the capital this year to purchase a place for his son and is at present staying in Feng Zi-ying's house. It looks as if in his hands she might stand a good chance of getting better. Anyway, I've already sent someone round with my card and and asked him to call. It's getting a bit late for him to come today, but he should definitely be round tomorrow. Feng Zi-ying promised to see him when he got back and put in a word for me to make quite sure that he agrees to come. So we'll just have to wait and see what this Dr Zhang says.'

You-shi was delighted with this news.

'And what are we going to do about Father's birthday?' she asked. 'It's the day after tomorrow.'

'I've just been out to see him,' said Cousin Zhen, 'and I took the opportunity while I was there of asking him if he would come over on his birthday to receive everyone's kowtows, but he refused. He said, "I've got used to the peace and quiet of the monastery and I'm not willing to go back into your quarrelsome world again. If you insist on celebrating my birthday it would be a hundred times better to have my tract on *Divine Rewards* written out by a good calligrapher and cut on blocks for printing than to drag me back to your house for a lot of senseless head-knocking." He said, "If the family turn up tomorrow and the day after for my birthday, you can give them a party yourself. But don't go sending me any presents," he said, "and don't come yourself! If it will set your mind at zest you can give me a kotow now and get it over with. But if you come round here the day after tomorrow with a lot of other people to pester me, I shall refuse to see you." Well, after that I obviously can't go again on his birthday. We'd better have Lai Sheng in and make arrangements for two days' entertainment.'

You-shi called in Jia Rong.

'Tell Lal Sheng to prepare the usual two-day party for Grandfather,' she said. 'Say we want a really good spread. We shall be asking Lady Jia.and Sir Zheng and Lady Wang and your Auntie Lian from the other house: you can go round yourself to invite them.

'And by the way: today your father heard of a good doctor and has already sent someone to ask him round. He should be coming tomorrow. When he does, you had better tell him exactly what your wife's symptoms have been during the past few days.'

Jia Rong promised to carry out his mother's instructions and left the room, encountering, as he did so, the youth who had been sent to Feng Zi-ying's house to request a call from the doctor. He had just got back from delivering his message and reported to Jia Rong as follows:

'I took the Master's card to the doctor at Mr Feng's house and asked him to call. He said Mr Feng had already spoken to him about it, but he had been out visiting all day and only just got back and he simply didn't have the energy to go out any more today. He said, "Even if I were to go round to your house now I shouldn't be

able to take the young lady's pulse. It would take me all night to get my breathing regulated. However," he said, "I shall definitely call round tomorrow." And he said, "My knowledge of medicine is really too slight for a consultation of this importance, but as your master and Mr Feng are so pressing, I obviously cannot refuse. But I hope you will explain this to your master." And he said, "As for your master's card, that is an honour I really cannot accept"; and he made me bring it back. Will you please pass on this message for me, Master Rong?'

Jia Rong turned and went back into the room to tell his parents. Going out once more, he summoned Lai Sheng and gave instructions for preparing a two-day birthday party, which Lai Sheng duly proceeded to put into operation. But of that no more.

About noon next day one of the servants at the gate came in to report:

'The Dr Zhang you sent for has arrived, sir'.

Cousin Zhen went out to receive the doctor and conducted him into the main reception room, where they both sat down. He waited until the doctor had taken tea before broaching the subject of his visit.

'Yesterday Mr Feng was telling me about your great learning,' said Cousin Zhen. 'I gather that it includes a profound knowledge of medicine. I assure you I was very much impressed.'

'I am only a very indifferent scholar,' replied Dr Zhang, 'and my knowledge is really extremely superficial. However, Mr Feng was telling me yesterday of the courteous and considerate patronage of scholars which is traditional in your family, so when I received your summons I felt unable to refuse. I must insist, though, that I am entirely lacking in real learning and am acutely embarrassed to think that this will all too soon become apparent.'

'My dear sir, you are altogether too modest,' said Cousin Zhen. 'Do you think I could ask you to go in now and have a look at my daughter-in4aw? We are relying on your superior knowledge to put us out of our uncertainty.'

He left the doctor in the charge of Jia Rong, who conducted him through the inner part of the house to his own apartment, where Qin-shi was.

'Is this the lady?' asked the doctor.

'Yes, this is my wife,' Jia Rong replied. 'Do sit down! I expect you would like me to describe her symptoms first, before you take the pulse?'

'If you will permit me, no,' said the doctor. 'I think it would be better if I took the pulse first and asked you about the development of the illness afterwards. This is the first time .I have been to your house, and as I am not a skilled practitioner and have only come here at our friend Mr Feng's insistence, I think I should take the pulse and give you my diagnosis first. We can go on to talk about her symptoms and discuss a course of treatment if you are satisfied with the diagnosis. And of course, it will still be up to you to decide whether or not the treatment I prescribe is to be followed.'

'You speak with real authority, doctor,' said Jia kong. 'I only wish we had got to hear of you earlier. Take her pulse now, then, and let us know whether what she has can be cured, so that my parents may be spared further anxiety.'

At this point Qin-shi's women carried in a large arm-rest of the kind used in consultations, propped her forward with her arms across it, and drew back her sleeves, exposing both arms at the wrist. The doctor stretched out his hand and laid it on her right wrist, then, having first regulated his own breathing in order to be able to count the rate, he felt the pulses with great concentration for the space of several minutes, after which he transferred to the left wrist and spent an equal amount of time on that. This done, he proposed that they should withdraw to the outside room to talk.

Jia Rong accompanied him outside and sat with him on the kang. An old woman served tea, which Jia Rong invited the doctor to take, waiting until he had done so before asking him for his diagnosis.

'Tell me, doctor, from your reading of my wife's pulse, do you think she can be cured?'

'Well, the lower left distal pulse is rapid and the lower left median pulse is strong and full,' said the doctor.

‘On the right side, the distal pulse is thin and lacks strength and the median pulse is faint and lacks vitality.

‘Now, a rapid lower left-hand distal pulse means that a malfunction of the controlling humour of the heart is causing it to generate too much fire; and the strong lower median pulse means that the liver’s humour is blocked, giving rise to a deficiency of blood. A thin, weak distal pulse on the right side indicates a gross deficiency of humour in the lungs; and a faint right median pulse lacking in vitality shows that the earth of the spleen is being subdued by the woody element of the liver.

‘If the heart is generating fire, the symptoms should be irregularity of the menses and insomnia. A deficiency of blood and blockage of humour in the liver would result in pain and congestion under the ribs, delay of the menses beyond their term, and burning sensations in the heart. A deficiency of humour in the lungs would give rise to sudden attacks of giddiness, sweating at five or six in the morning, and a sinking feeling rather like the feeling you get in a pitching boat. And if the earth of the spleen is being subdued by the wood of the liver, she would undoubtedly experience loss of appetite, lassitude, and general enfeeblement of the whole body. If my reading of the lady’s pulse is correct, she ought to be showing all these symptoms. Some people would tell you they indicated a pregnancy, but I am afraid I should have to disagree.’

‘You must have second sight, doctor!’ said one of the old women, a body-servant of Qin-shi’s who was standing by. ‘What you have said exactly describes how it is with her; there is no need for us to tell you anything more. Of all the doctors we’ve lately had around here to look at her none has ever spoken as much to the point as this. Some have said she’s expecting; others have said it’s illness; one says it’s not serious; another only gives her till the winter solstice; not one of them tells you anything you can really rely on. Please doctor, you tell us: just how serious *is* this illness ?’

‘I am afraid my colleagues have allowed your mistress’s condition to deteriorate,’ said the doctor. ‘If she had been given proper treatment at the very beginning, when she first started her courses, there is every reason to suppose that she would by now be completely cured. But the illness has been neglected for so long now, this breakdown was almost bound to happen. I would say that with proper treatment she has about a one in three chance of recovery. We shall just have to see how she responds to my medicine. If, after taking it, she can get a good night’s sleep, her chances will be distinctly better: say fifty-fifty.

‘From my reading of her pulse, I should expect your mistress to be a very highly strung, sensitive young woman. Sometimes, when people are over-sensitive, they find a good deal that is
upsetting in what goes on around them; and of course, if things are upsetting them, they will tend to worry a lot. This illness has been caused by too much worry affecting the spleen and causing an excess of wood in the liver, with the result that the menstrual blood has been prevented from flowing at the proper times. If we were to ask your mistress about the dates of her courses, I am sure we should find that they tended to be on the late side, isn’t that so?’

‘Absolutely right,’ the old woman replied. ‘Her periods have never been early. Sometimes two or three days late, sometimes as much as ten days: but in any case, always late.’

‘You see!’ said the doctor. ‘There is the cause of the trouble. If she could have been treated in time with something to fortify the heart and stabilize the humours, she would never have got into this present state. What we have now, I am afraid, is an advanced case of dehydration. Well, we shall have to see what my medicine can do for her.’

He wrote out the following prescription and handed it to Jia Rong:

For a decoction to increase the breath, nourish the heart, fortify the spleen and calm the liver

R

Ginseng	2 drams
Atractylis (clay-baked)	2 drams

Lycoperdon	3 drams
Nipplewort (processed)	4 drams
Angelica	2 drams
White peony root	2 drams
Hemlock parsley	1½ drams
Yellow vetch root	3 drams
Ground root of nutgrass	2 drams
Hate's ear (in vinegar)	¾ dram
Huaiqing yam	2 drams
Dong E ass's glue (prepn with powdered oyster-shell)	2 drams
Corydalis (cooked in wine)	1½ drams
Roast liquorice	¾ dram

Adjuvant:Excoriate and remove pits from 7 lotus-seeds;

Item 2 large jujubes.

'Most impressive!' said Jia Rong, glancing at the prescription. 'Tell me, though, doctor: just how serious is this illness? Is her life in danger?'

The doctor smiled. 'You are an intelligent young man, Mr Jia. When an illness has reached this stage, it is not going to be cured in an afternoon. We must see how she responds to medication. As I see it, there is no real danger this winter. I should say that if she can get past the spring equinox, you could look forward to a complete recovery.'

Jia Rong was intelligent enough to understand the real import of what the doctor was telling him and did not question him further. Having first seen him out, he went in to show the prescription and written summary of the diagnosis to Cousin Zhen and gave both his parents a full account of what the doctor had said.

'No other doctor has ever spoken so convincingly,' said You-shi, turning to Cousin Zhen. 'I am sure his medicine will do her good.'

Cousin Zhen smiled complacently.

'This man is no medical hack practising for a living,' he said. 'It's only because Feng Zi-ying is such a good friend of mine that he could be persuaded to come and see us. Perhaps with a man like this treating her our daughter-in4aw stands some chance of getting better. J see there is ginseng in that prescription, by the way. You can use some of that pound of high-grade ginseng we bought the other day.'

Seeing that they had no more to say, Jia Rong went Out and ordered the drugs for Qin-shi's medicine to be purchased and prepared. But you will have to read the next chapter if you want to know what effect the medicine had on her when she had taken it.

CHAPTER 11

Ning-guo House celebrates the birthday
of an absent member
And Jia Rui conceives an illicit passion
for his attractive cousin

Jia Jing's birthday had now arrived. Cousin Zhen packed sixteen lacquer gift-boxes with the rarest and choicest delicacies and instructed Jia Rong to take a number of domestics with him and deliver them to Jia Jing. He was to observe carefully whether or not his grandfather was pleased, and having made his kotow, was to deliver the following message:

‘Because of your request, Father has not ventured to visit you himself. Instead he will place himself at the head of the entire family and lead them in prostrating themselves in your direction.’

Having received his father’s instructions, Jia Rong mustered his band of servants and set out.

Back at home visitors gradually began to arrive. Jia Lian and Jia Qiang were the first. Having inspected the various seating arrangements, they inquired whether there was to be entertainment of some kind.

‘The Master had originally been reckoning on old Sir Jing coming here today,’ said one of the servants, ‘so be didn’t arrange for any entertainment. But the day before yesterday he learned that Sir Jing would not be coming, so he asked us to find a troupe of actors and a band. They are at present on the stage in the garden getting ready for the performance.’

Lady Xing, Lady Wang, Wang Xi-feng and Bao-yu arrived next and were welcomed and conducted inside by Cousin Zhen and You-shi. You-shi’s mother was already there. She was introduced to the new arrivals, who were then invited to sit down and were served by Cousin Zhen and You-shi with tea.

‘We realize,’ said Cousin Zhen, ‘that Lady Jia is a generation older than Father. Father is only her nephew, of course, and strictly speaking it wasn’t correct form to invite a person of her age at all. Nevertheless, since the weather is so fresh and nice lust now and the chrysanthemums in the garden at their best, we had rather hoped that she might enjoy coming over for a bit and having all her children and grandchildren around her. That was our only motive in asking her. I’m sorry she decided not to honour us.’

‘Up to yesterday,’ Xi-feng put in hurriedly, not waiting for Lady Wang to reply, ‘Grandmother had been intending to come. Then yesterday evening she saw Bao-yu eating some peaches and the greedy old thing couldn’t resist trying one herself. She only ate about two thirds of a peach, but she had to get up twice running in the early hours, and this morning she still felt rather poorly and told me to tell you that she definitely wouldn’t be able to come. But she said that if you have any specially nice things to eat she would like one or two kinds to try; only they must be soft and easy to digest.’

Cousin Zhen smiled with pleasure.

‘Well, that’s all right then. Knowing how much Grandma enjoys a bit of fun, I thought it didn’t seem like her not to come today unless she had some good reason for not coming.’

‘The other day Xi-chun was telling us that Rong’s wife is not very well,’ said Lady Wang. ‘What exactly is wrong with her?’

‘It’s a very puzzling illness,’ You-shi replied. ‘At Mid-Autumn last month, when she got back from playing cards half the night with you and Lady Jia, she seemed perfectly all right. But from the twentieth onwards she seemed to get more and more tired and listless every day—too tired even to eat. She’s been like that for more than a fortnight now, and it is two months since she had a period.’

‘Couldn’t she be expecting ?’ said Lady Xing.

They were interrupted by a servant from outside:

‘Sir She and Sir Zheng and all the other gentlemen have arrived, sir. They are in the main reception room.’

Cousin Zhen hurried out.

‘To begin with that’s what some of the doctors told us,’ said You-shi, resuming the conversation; ‘but yesterday Feng Zi-ying introduced a doctor friend of his to us who is terribly good, someone he went to school with, and he said that she wasn’t expecting at all. He said she was suffering from a serious illness. He wrote a prescription for her yesterday and she has already had one dose of the medicine. Today her giddiness is a bit better, but everything else is still pretty much the same.’

‘There!’ said Xi-feng. ‘I thought it must be something quite serious to keep *her* away, especially on a day

like this. I know she would have forced herself to come if she could have done.'

'You remember you saw her here on the third,' said You-shi. 'She had a terrible struggle to keep going on that occasion. It was only because the two of you have always been so close and she didn't want to miss you that she made the effort.'

Xi-feng's eyes became moist and for a moment she was too overcome to speak.

'I know "the weather and human life are both unpredictable",' she said at last, 'but she's only a child still. If anything should happen to her as a result of this illness, I think all the fun would go Out of life!'

While she was speaking Jia Rong came in, and having greeted in turn first Lady Xing, then Lady Wang, and then Xi-feng, he turned to his mother:

'I've just delivered the food to Grandfather, and I told him that Father was entertaining all the men of the family at home and had not presumed to visit him because of what he said. Grandfather was very pleased. He said "That is exactly as it should be." He said I was to tell you and Father to see that my great-uncles and great-aunts are properly looked after, and he told me that I was to look after my uncles and aunts and cousins. He also said he wanted the blocks for *Divine Rewards* to be cut as quickly as possible and ten thousand copies printed for free distribution. I've already given this message to Father. Now I've got to hurry off again to look after the gentlemen while they have their dinner.'

'Rong, just a moment!' said Xi-feng as he was going. 'How is it really with your wife?'

Jia Rong's brows contracted in a worried frown.

'She's not at all well, Auntie. You'll know what I mean when you see her presently.'

He left without saying any more.

'Well, ladies!' said You-shi. 'Will you have dinner in here, or shall we eat in the garden? There are some actors in the garden preparing an entertainment.'

'In here would be all right, wouldn't it?' said Lady Wang with a glance in Lady Xing's direction.

You-shi at once gave orders to her women to serve. There was an answering cry from outside the door and a great flurry of domestics each bustling about her own contribution to the meal. In no time at all the table was laid and dinner ready. You-shi made Lady Xing and Lady Wang sit at the head with her mother, while she, xi-feng and Bao-yu sat at the two sides.

Lady Xing and Lady Wang politely protested that they had come to offer birthday felicitations, not to eat a birthday feast.

'Yes,' said Xi-feng. 'After all these years of spiritual self-improvement, Uncle must by now be practically an Immortal. And with Immortals, as we all know, "it's the thought that counts and not the ceremony".'

The others all laughed.

You-shi's mother, Lady Xing, Lady Wang and Xi-feng, having finished their meal, rinsed Out their mouths and washed their hands, had just announced their intention of going into the garden, when Jia Rong came in with a message for his mother.

'My great-uncles and all the other gentlemen have just finished their dinner. Great-uncle She says he has business at home, and Great-uncle Zheng doesn't like plays because he says he can't stand the noise; but all the others have gone with Uncle Lian and Cousin Qiang to watch the players.

'People have come with cards and birthday presents from the Prince of An-nan, the Prince of Dong-ping, the Prince of Xi-ning, the Prince of Bei-jing, the Duke of Zhen-guo and five others of the Niu clan and the Marquis of Zhong-jing and seven others of the Shi clan. The presents have all been received at the counting-house. They have been entered in the gift-book, and the people who brought them have been issued

with thank-you cards. They have also been tipped the usual amounts and given a meal before leaving.

'And Father says will you please bring the great-aunts and Grandmother You and Auntie Feng to the garden now.'

'Yes, we've finished too,' said You-shi. We were about to come over when you arrived.'

'Aunt Wang,' said Xi-feng, 'may I go and see Rong's wife first? I can go on to the garden from there.'

'Certainly. You ought to go,' said Lady *Wang*. 'In fact, we should all like to go with you, but I am afraid it would be too much excitement for her. Please give her our love.'

'My dear,' said You-shi, 'I know she will always do any-thing *you* ask her to. See if you can talk her into a more cheerful frame of mind. It would be such a relief to me if you could. But join us in the garden as soon as you can!'

Bao-yu asked if he could go with Xi-feng to see Qin-shi.

'Yes,' said Lady Wang. 'She is your nephew's wife. I think you should. Just look in for a moment, though, and then join the rest of us.'

Thereupon You-shi invited Lady Wang, Lady Xing and old Mrs You to accompany her to the All-scents Garden, while Xi-feng and Bao-yu accompanied Jia Rong to Qin-shi's room.

Entering the door of the apartment, they tiptoed softly into the inner room. As soon as she saw them, Qin-shi attempted to rise, but Xi-feng would not let her.

'No, no, don't get up!' she said. 'You will make yourself giddy.'

In two rapid strides she was at her side and holding her by the hand.

'My dearest child! It's only a few days since last I saw you, but look how thin you have grown!'

She sat down beside her on the quilt on which she sat propped. Bao-yu, after greeting her, sat in a chair opposite.

'Pour out some tea,' said Jia Rong. 'Auntie Feng and Uncle Bao didn't get any after their dinner.'

Qin-shi grasped Xi-feng's hand and forced a smile to her wan face.

'It looks as though I wasn't *meant* to be happy, Auntie!' she said. 'This is such a lovely family to have married into. Rong's parents treat me as if I were their own daughter. Rong may be young, but he respects me, and I respect him; there has never been a cross word between us. You, it goes without saying—but not only you, *all* the over members of the family—have always been goodness itself to me. I did so want to he worthy of all this kindness. But now this wretched illness has come along and taken away the chance. Now I shall never be able to be a good daughter to Rong's parents; and however badly I want to, I shall never be able to repay any of the love you have shown me. I have a feeling inside me, Auntie: I don't think lam going to last the year out.'

Bao-yu had been studying the 'Spring Slumber' painting on Qin-shi's wall all this time and re-reading the couplet by Qin Guan on the scrolls at each side of it:

The coldness of spring has imprisoned the soft buds in a wintry dream;

The fragrance of wine has intoxicated the beholder with imagined flower-scents.

As he did so, the memory returned of that earlier afternoon when he had slept in that very same room and dreamed about the Land of Illusion. He was musing on the contents of that dream when he suddenly became aware of the words that Qin-shi was saying. They pierced his heart like the points

of a thousand arrows. Great tears welled up in his eyes and rolled down his cheeks. Xi-feng, seeing him, was herself deeply affected; but fearing that the sight of his grief might make Qin-shi even more distressed, whereas the declared purpose of their visit had been to cheer her up, she rallied him lightly on his tears.

'Don't be such a baby, Bao-yu! It's not really that serious:

sick people always say things like that. Besides, she's still young, and when you are young you can shake an illness off in no time at all. - You mustn't let yourself think such stupid things,' she said, turning to Qin-shi. 'You'll make yourself worse.'

'If only she could get a bit of food inside her.' said Jia Rong. 'That's her real trouble: she won't eat anything.'

'Bao,' said Xi-feng, 'your mother told you not to stay long. If you're going to be like this, you will only upset her, and in any case I expect your mother is beginning to wonder about you—You go on ahead with Uncle Bao,' she said to Jia Rong. 'I am going to sit a little longer with your wife.'

Jia Rong at once led Bao-yu away to join the others in the All-scents Garden, while Xi-feng addressed some words of encouragement to Qin-shi, after which, dropping her voice to a murmur, she engaged in a long and intimate conversation with her, ignoring two or three messages from You-shi urging her to join the party. At last she felt unable to stay any longer.

'Look after yourself!' she said. 'I shall come again. I feel sure that you are meant to get better. It can't have been an accident that they found that doctor the other day; and now that you've got him, there's really nothing to worry about.'

Qin-shi smiled.

'Even if he's a miracle-man, Auntie, "death's a sickness none can cure", and I know that it's just a question of time now.'

'If you *will* go on talking like that, how can you possibly get better?' said Xi-feng. 'If only you would try to look on the bright side. Remember what the doctor said. He said that if you weren't being properly treated, next spring would be dangerous for you. If this were a household which couldn't afford things like ginseng for your treatment, you might have something to worry about. But now they know that you can be cured, there's nothing Rong's parents wouldn't do and nothing they couldn't afford to do for you. Never mind two drams of ginseng a day; if you needed two *pound* a day, they would get it for you gladly. So do try and get better! I must go over to the garden now.'

'Forgive me for not being able to see you Out, Auntie,' said Qin-shi. 'Please come again when you are free. We'll have a nice talk together, just the two of us.'

There were tears in Xi-feng's eyes as she promised to come often, whenever she was free. Then, followed by the women who had accompanied her from the Rong mansion and a number of female domestics belonging to the Ning household, she made her way round to one of the side gates leading into the gardens.

Golden chrysanthemums covered the open spaces;
Silvery willow-trees bordered the water's margins.
The little bridge arched its span over a storied stream;
The winding path made its way into a fairy hill.
Crystal rills tinkled amidst the rocks.
A quickset hedge recalled preautumnal fragrances.
Crimson leaves fluttered upon the boughs.

A wintry copse described calligraphic traceries.
In the cold wind's more insistent blast
The oriole's cry could still be heard.
In the late sun's more infrequent warmth
The cricket's chirp a while revived.
At the far south-east end
Pavilions nestled in artificial mountains.
On the near north-west side
Verandahs brooded on circumjacent waters.
Music of little organs playing in the summer-house
Increased the melancholy in the air.
Glimpses of women's dresses flitting through the little wood
Enhanced the delicacy of the scene.

Xi-feng was making her way through the garden, admiring the view as she went, when a figure suddenly stepped Out from behind an artificial hill of rock and made its way towards her:

'How are you, cousin?'

Xi-feng gave a start of surprise and retreated a step.

'Isn't it Cousin Rui?'

'Don't you even know who I am, cousin?'

'It isn't that I don't know you,' said Xi-feng, 'but you did come up rather suddenly and I wasn't expecting to see you here.'

'We must have been fated to meet, cousin,' said Jia Rui. 'I had just slipped away from the party to take a little stroll in these peaceful surroundings. I never expected to meet my fair cousin here, but lo So there must be a bond.'

He ogled her as he spoke with a fixed and meaningful stare.

Xi-feng's sharp intelligence enabled her to penetrate without much difficulty the little game he was playing, and feigning an interest she did not feel, she answered him with a smile.

'I can see why Lian is always speaking so highly of you. From seeing you today and just hearing you speak those few words I can tell at once that you are an intelligent, good-natured sort of person. At the moment I'm on my way to join my aunts, and I'm afraid that I can't stay and talk to you. Perhaps we could meet some other time when we are both free?'

'I should like to call on you when you are at home,' said Jia Rui, 'but I suppose a young person like your good self is not in a position to receive visitors of the other sex.'

Xi-feng feigned a laugh.

'We're all one family—all one flesh and blood. I don't see that age comes into it.'

Jia Rui was secretly delighted by this encouragement.

'I never dreamed today would bring a chance like this my way,' he thought, and the goatish eagerness of his expression grew even more repellent.

'You had better hurry back to the party,' said Xi-feng. 'If they catch you playing truant, you will find yourself being sconced!'

Jia Rui was by now scarcely in command of his own person. Slowly, very slowly he walked away,

frequently turning back to gaze at Xi-feng as he did so. Xi-feng mischievously provoked him by deliberately slowing down the pace of her own progress through the garden.

'What an odious creature!' she thought to herself when there was some distance between them. 'Appearances certainly are deceptive! Who would have guessed he was that sort of person? Well, if he is, he had better look out! One of these days I'll settle his hash for him; then perhaps he will realize what sort of person he is up against!'

Xi-feng had resumed a normal pace and had just skirted the foot of a little hill, when she saw two or three old serving-women hurrying towards her in a state of great agitation.

'Oh, Mrs Lian,' said one of the old women with a smile, when they caught sight of her, 'our mistress has been getting into such a state because you didn't come! She's sent us to fetch you.'

'Just like your mistress!' said Xi-feng. 'Always in a lather about something or other!' and she sauntered on quite Unconcernedly, talking to the old woman as she went.

'How many pieces have they done so far?'

'Eight or nine,' the old woman replied.

By this time they had arrived at the rear entrance of the two-storey Celestial Fragrance Pavilion, where they found Bao-yu playing with a group of maids.

'Mind you don't make a nuisance of yourself, Bao,' said Xi-feng.

'Lady Xing and Lady Wang are sitting upstairs watching,' said one of the maids. 'You can get up there from this side, madam.'

Lifting up her skirts, Xi-feng climbed slowly up the stairs. She found You-shi standing at the top waiting for her.

'You *are* an affectionate pair!' said You-shi with a smile. 'Once the two of you meet, there's no separating you. Tomorrow you had better move in with her and set up house together! Come on, sit down! I'm going to drink a cup of wine with you!'

Xi-feng asked her two aunts for permission to sit. When she had done so You-shi held out the playbill and invited her to make a choice.

'It's not for me to choose when Mother and Aunt Wang are here,' said Xi-feng.

'Go ahead and choose!' said Lady Xing. 'Mrs You and your aunt and I have already chosen a number of plays. Now you pick Out one or two good ones for us!'

Xi-feng politely rose to thank her, and taking the playbill from You-shi, scanned it through and picked out two of the items listed: one a scene from *The Return of the Soul* and the other 'Gai-nian Plays His Guitar' from *The Palace of Eternal Youth.*

'If they do these two after they have finished singing this scene from *Faithful Bi-lian,'* she said, handing the playbill back to You-shi, 'I think that will be just about enough for the day.'

'I'm sure it will,' said Lady Wang. 'We ought in any case to break up early, so that our hosts can get a good night's rest. They have had a lot on their minds lately.'

'It isn't often that you both come to see us,' said You-shi.

'Please stay as long as you can. It will be so much more fun. It's really quite early yet.'

'Where have all the gentlemen gone to ?' inquired Xi-feng, who had got up from her seat and was peering down into the lower storey.

'They have gone off to the Frozen Sunlight Gallery to drink,' said one of the old women in attendance. 'They left only a moment ago. They've taken the band with them.'

‘What was wrong with this place?’ said Xi-feng, ‘Heaven knows what they can be getting up to behind our backs!’

‘We can’t all be as strait4aced as you are,’ said You-shi with a laugh.

As they laughed and chattered together, the actors eventually finished performing the second of the two pieces Xi-feng had selected, whereupon the wine was removed from the tables and rice served. When they had finished their meal, the company retired to the main reception room indoors and took tea there, after which carriages were called for and the other ladies took their leave of old Mrs You. You-shi stood at the head of all the concubines and female domestics of the Ning household to see them outside, while Cousin Zhen at the head of the junior male members of his family stood beside the waiting carriages.

‘You must come again tomorrow, ladies,’ said Cousin Zhen to Lady Xing and Lady Wang as they emerged from the house.

‘I think not,’ said Lady Wang. ‘We have sat here the whole day being entertained and we are all rather tired now. I think tomorrow we should like a rest.’

Jia Rui was staring fixedly at Xi-feng throughout this exchange.

After Cousin Zhen had gone indoors again, Li Gui led out a horse and Bao-yu mounted on its back and rode off behind Lady Wang’s carriage. Cousin Zhen and the other males then sat down to supper and, when it was over, the party broke up. Next day there was another day of feasting for the members of the clan, particulars of which, however, we omit from our record. We shall confine ourselves to observing that from that day on Xi-feng paid frequent calls on Qin-shi. Sometimes her illness seemed slightly better for a day or two, sometimes it seemed slightly worse. Cousin Zhen, You-shi and Jia Rong were acutely worried.

*

Jia Rui made several visits to the Rong mansion, but all his calls seemed to coincide with Xi-feng’s visits to the Ning mansion to see Qin-shi.

The thirtieth day of the eleventh month, the day of the winter solstice, arrived. It was the turn of the season, and for several days before it Grandmother Jia, Lady Wang and Xi-feng had been sending messengers daily to inquire after Qin shi. Each time the report they brought back was the same:

‘She hasn’t got any worse these last few days, but she doesn’t seem to be very much better.’

‘At this time of year,’ said Lady Wang, ‘it’s a hopeful sign if an illness like hers *doesn’t* get any worse.’

‘Oh I do hope so!’ said Grandmother Jia. ‘That sweet child! If anything should happen to her, it would break my heart.’

A wave of bitterness passed over her.

‘You and she have always been good friends,’ she said turning to Xi-feng. ‘Tomorrow is the “First of the Last”. Go and see her again some time after tomorrow. Have a very careful look and try to find out exactly how she is. If she seems a bit better, come and tell me when you get back. And if there is anything the dear child has ever fancied eating in the past, see that she is kept constantly supplied with it.’

Xi-feng promised to do as she had said, and on the second day of the next month she went over to the Ning-guo mansion as soon as she had finished her breakfast. Qin-shi’s sickness appeared to be no worse than previously, but the flesh on her face and body was pitifully wasted. Xi-feng sat for a long time chatting with her, and once more urged her to take a more optimistic view of her illness.

‘We shall know the worst when the spring comes,’ said Qin-shi. ‘At least I’ve got past the solstice without

anything happening, so perhaps I *shall* get better. Give Grandma and Auntie Wang my regards, won't you. I've eaten one or two bits of that yam-cake with the date stuff inside that Grandma sent me yesterday. I found it quite easy to digest.'

'I'll send you some more tomorrow,' said Xi-feng. 'Now I must go and see your mother-in-law, and after that I have to hurry back and give my report on you to Grandma.'

'Give Grandma and Auntie Wang my love, Auntie.'

'I will,' said Xi-feng, and left her.

She went into You-shi's reception room and sat down.

'Tell me honestly,' said You-shi. 'What did you think of her?'

Xi-feng sat silent for some time with lowered head.

'There's no hope, is there? You'll have to start getting things ready for the end. Of course, it's always possible that doing so may break the bad luck.'

'I've already been quietly making a few preparations on the side,' said You-shi. 'The only thing we haven't yet got is the right timber {or the you know what. But we're looking round all the time.

Xi-feng had some tea and chatted a while longer with You-shi. Then she said:

'I must hurry back to report to Grandma.'

'Break it to her gently,' said You-shi. 'You don't want to give her a shock, at her age.'

'Of course,' said Xi-feng, and rising to her feet went straight back home and called on Grandmother Jia.

'Rong's wife asked me to give you her regards, Grandma. She sends you a kotow and she says she feels somewhat better. She begs you not to worry about her. And she says that when she's made a bit more progress she's going to come over to see you and make you a kotow in person.'

'How did you think she seemed?' said Grandmother Jia.

'For the time being there doesn't seem to be anything much to worry about,' said Xi-feng. 'She seems to be in quite good spirits.'

For a long time the old lady brooded in silence. Then, remembering Xi-feng, she told her to change her clothes and rest a while.

Xi-feng said yes, she would, and after calling on Lady Wang, went back to her own apartment, where Patience had warmed her everyday clothes for her to change into. When she had changed, she sat down and asked Patience if anything had happened during her absence.

Nothing, really,' said Patience, handing her some tea. 'Brightie's wife came with the interest on the three hundred taels of silver and I received it for you. Oh, and Mr Rui sent someone to ask if you were in. He wants to pay you a call and talk about something.'

Xi-feng snorted.

'Horrible creature! he seems to be *looking* for trouble. Just let him come, then!'

'What does Mr Rui want?' asked Patience. 'Why does he keep coming like this?'

In reply Xi-feng gave her a full account of her encounter with him in the garden of the Ning-guo mansion and of the things he had said to her on that occasion,

'What a nasty, disgusting man!' said Patience. 'A case of "the toad on the ground wanting to eat the goose in the sky". He'll come to no good end, getting ideas like that!'

'Just wait till he comes! ' said Xi-feng. 'I know how to deal with him.'

But if you wish to know the outcome of Jia Rui's visit, you will have to read the next chapter.

CHAPTER 12

Wang Xi-feng sets a trap for her admirer
And Jia Rui looks into the wrong side of the mirror

Jia Rui's arrival was announced while Xi-feng and Patience were still talking about him.

'Ask him in,' said Xi-feng.

Hearing that he was to be received, Jia Rui rejoiced inwardly. He came into the room wreathed in smiles and overwhelmed Xi-feng with civilities. With feigned solicitude she pressed him to be seated and to take tea. He became quite ecstatic at the sight of her informal dress.

'Why isn't Cousin Lian back yet?' he asked, staring with fascinated eyes.

'I don't know what the reason can be,' said Xi-feng.

'Could it be,' Jia Rui inquired archly, 'that Someone has detained him on his way home and that he can't tear himself away?'

Men are all the same!' said Xi-feng. 'They have only to set eyes on a woman to begin another affair.'

'Ah, there you are wrong!' said Jia Rui. '*I* am not that sort of man.'

'But how many men are there like you?' said Xi-feng. 'I doubt you could find one in ten.'

At this last remark Jia Rui positively scratched his ears with pleasure.

'You must find it very dull here on your own every day,' he said.

'Yes, indeed!' said Xi-feng. 'If only there were someone who could come and talk to me and help me to pass the time!'

'Well,' said Jia Rui, 'I am always free. How would it be if I were to come every day to help you pass the time?'

'You must be joking!' said Xi-feng. 'What would you want to come here for?'

'I mean every word I say,' said Jia Rui. 'May I be struck by lightning if I don't! True, there was a time when I should have been scared to come, because people always told me what a holy terror you were and how dangerous it was to cross you; but now I know that in reality you are all gentleness and flin, there is nothing that could stop me coming. I would come now if it cost me my life.'

'It's true then,' said Xi-feng, smiling delightedly. 'You really are an *understanding* sort of person - so much more so than Rong or Qiang! I used to think that since they were such handsome and cultured4ooking young men they must be understanding as well, but they turned out to be stupid brutes without the least consideration for other people's feelings.'

This little speech went straight to Jia Rui's heart, and unconsciously he began edging his seat nearer to Xi-feng's. He peered closely at an embroidered purse that she was wearing and expressed a strong interest in one of her rings.

'Take care!' said Xi-feng in a low tone. 'The servants might see you!'

Obedient to his goddess's command, Jia Rui quickly drew back again. Xi-feng laughed.

'You had better go!'

'Ah no, cruel cousin! Let me stay a little longer!'

'Even if you stay, it's not very convenient here in broad daylight, with people coming and going all the time. Go away now and come hack later when it's dark, at the beginning of the first watch. You can slip into the

gallery west of this apartment and wait for me there.'

Jia Rui received these words like someone being presented with a rare and costly jewel.

'Are you sure you're not joking ?'he asked hurriedly. 'A lot of people must go through that way. How should we avoid being seen?'

'Don't worry!' said Xi-feng. 'I'll give the watchmen a night off. When the side gates are closed, no one else can get through.'

Jia Rui was beside himself with delight and hurriedly took his leave, confident that the fu1filment of all he wished for was now in sight. Having waited impatiently for nightfall, he groped his way into the Rong-guo mansion just before they closed the gates and slipped into the gallery, now totally deserted—as Xi-feng had promised it would be—and black as pitch.

The gate at the end of the alley-way opening on to Grandmother Jia's quarters had already been barred on the outer side; only the gate at the east end remained open. For a long time Jia Rui listened intently, but no one came. Suddenly there was a loud slam and the gate at the east end, too, banged shut. Alarmed, but not daring to make a sound, Jia Rui stealthily crept out and tried it. It was locked—as tight as a bucket. Now even if he wanted to get out he could not, for the walls on either side of the alley-way were too high to scale. Moreover the gallery was bare and draughty and this was the midwinter season when the nights are long and the bitter north wind seems to pierce into the very marrow of the bones. By the end of the night he was almost dead with cold.

When at last morning came, Jia Rui saw the gate at the east end open and an old woman pass through to the gate opposite and call for someone to open up. Still hugging himself against the cold, he sprinted out of the other gate while her back was towards him. Fortunately no one was about at that early hour, and he was able to slip out of the rear entrance of the mansion and run back home unseen.

Jia Rui had lost both of his parents in infancy and had been brought up under the sole guardianship of his grandfather Jia Dai-ru. Obsessed by the fear that once outside the house his grandson might indulge in drinking and gambling to the detriment of his studies, Dai-ru had subjected him since early youth to an iron discipline from which not the slightest deviation was tolerated. Seeing him now suddenly absent himself a whole night from home, and being incapable, in his wildest imaginings, of guessing what had really happened, he took it as a foregone conclusion that he had been either drinking or gaming and had probably passed the night in some house of prostitution - a supposition which caused the old gentleman to spend the whole night in a state of extreme choler.

The prospect of facing his grandfather on arrival made Jia Rui sweat. A lie of some sort was indispensable.

'I went to see Uncle yesterday,' he managed to say, 'and M it was getting dark, he asked me to stay the night.'

'I have always told you that you are not to go out of that gate without first informing me,' said his grandfather. 'Why then did you presume to go off on your own yesterday without saying a word to anybody? That in itself would constitute sufficient grounds for chastisement. But in addition to that you are lying!'

Thereupon he, forced him to the ground, and, with the utmost savagery, dealt him thirty or forty whacks with the bamboo, after which he forbade him to eat and made him kneel in the open courtyard with a book in his hand until he had prepared the equivalent of ten days' homework.

The exquisite torments suffered by Jia Rui, as he knelt with an empty stomach in the draughty courtyard reciting his home-work after having already been frozen all night long and then beaten, can be imagined.

Yet even now his infatuation remained unaltered. It never entered his mind that he had been made a fool of. And so two days later, as soon as he had some free time, he was back once more looking for Xi-feng. She

deliberately reproached him for having failed her, thereby so exasperating him that he swore by the most terrible oaths that he had been faithful. Seeing him hurl himself so willingly into the net, Xi-feng decided that a further lesson would be needed to cure him of his folly and proposed another assignation.

'Only tonight,' she said, 'don't wait for me in that place again. Wait in the empty room in the little passage-way *behind* this apartment. But mind you don't run into anybody.'

'Do you really mean this?' said Jia Rui.

'If you don't believe me, don't come!'

'I'll come! I'll come!' said Jia Rui. 'Whatever happens, I shall be there.'

'Now I think you had better go.'

Confident of seeing her again in the evening, Jia Rui went off uncomplainingly, leaving Xi-feng time to muster her forces, brief her officers, and prepare the trap in which the luckless man was to be caught.

Jia Rui waited for the evening with great impatience. By a stroke of bad luck some relations came on a visit and stayed to supper. It was already lamplight when they left, and Jia Rui then had to wait for his grandfather to settle down for the night before he could scuttle off to the Rong mansion and make his way to the room in the little passage-way where Xi-feng had told him to go. He waited there for her arrival with the frenzied agitation of an ant on a hot saucepan. Yet, though he waited and waited, not a human shape appeared nor a human sound was heard, and he began to be frightened and a little suspicious:

'Surely she won't fall me? Surely I shan't be made to spend another night in the cold...?'

As he was in the midst of these gloomy imaginings, a dark figure glided into the room. Certain that it must be Xi-feng, Jia Rui cast all caution to the winds and, when the figure approached him, threw himself upon it like a hungry tiger seizing its prey or a cat pouncing on a harmless mouse.

'My darling, how I have waited for you!" he exclaimed, enfolding his beloved in his arms; and carrying her to the kang, he laid her down and began kissing her and tugging at her trousers, murmuring 'my sweetest darling' and 'my honey love' and other such endearments in between kisses. Through-out all of this not a single sound was uttered by his partner. Jia Rui now tore down his own trousers and prepared to thrust home his hard and throbbing; member. Suddenly a light flashed - and there was Jia Qiang holding aloft a candle in a candlestick which he shone around:

'Who is in this room?'

At this the person on the kang gave a giggle:

'Uncle Rui is trying to bugger me!'

Horrors I The sight he saw when he looked down made Jia Rui want to sink into the ground. It was Jia Rong! He turned to bolt, but Jia Qiang held him fast.

'Oh no you don't! Auntie Lian has already told Lady Wang that you have been pestering her. She asked us to keep you here while she went to tell. When lady Wang first heard, she was so angry that she fainted, but now she's come round again and ;s asking for you to be brought to her. Come along, then! Off we go!'

At these words Jia Rui's soul almost left its seat in his body.

'My dear nephew, just tell her that you didn't find me here!' he said. 'Tomorrow I will reward you handsomely.'

'I suppose I could let you go easily enough,' said Jia Qiang. 'The question is, how big would this reward be? In any case, just saying that you will give me a reward is no good. I should want a written guarantee.'

'But I can't put a thing like this down in writing!'

'No problem there,' said Jia Qiang. 'just say that you've lost money gambling and have borrowed such and

such an amount to cover your losses. That's all you need do.'

'I could do that, certainly,' said Jia Rui.

Jia Qiang at once disappeared and reappeared only a moment later with paper and a writing-brush which had evidently been made ready in advance. Writing at his dictation Jia Rui was compelled, in spite of protests, to put down fifty taels of silver as the amount on the IOU. The document, having been duly signed, was at once pocketed by Jia Qiang, who then pretended to seek the connivance of Jia Rong. But Jia Rong feigned the most obdurate incorruptibility and insisted that he would lay the matter next day before a council of the whole clan and see that justice was done. Jia Rui became quite frantic and kotowed to him. Finally, under pressure from Jia Qiang and in return for another IOU for fifty taels of silver made out in his favour, he allowed his scruples to be overcome.

'You realize, don't you,' said Jia Qiang, 'that I'm going to get into trouble for this? Now let's see. The gate leading to Lady Jia's courtyard was bolted some time ago, and Sir Zheng is at the moment in the main reception room looking at some stuff that has just arrived from Nanking, so you can't go through that way. The only way left would be through the back gate. The trouble is, though, that if you leave now, you might run into someone on the way, and then I should get into even worse trouble. You'd better let me scout around a bit first and come for you when the coast is clear. In the meantime you can t hide here, though, because they will shortly be coming in to store the stuff from Nanking here. I'll find somewhere else for you.'

He took Jia Rui by the arm, and having first blown the candle out, led him into the courtyard and groped his way round to the underside of the steps which led up to the terrace of the central building.

'This hollow under the steps will do. Crouch down there, and don't make a sound! You can go when I come for you.

Jia Qiang and Jia Rong then went off leaving him to himself.

Jia Rui, by now a mere automaton in the hands of his captors, obediently crouched down beneath the steps and was just beginning a series of calculations respecting his present financial predicament when a sudden *slosh!* signalled the discharge of a slop-pail's stinking contents immediately above his head, drenching him from top to toe with liquid filth and causing him to cry out in dismay - but only momentarily, for the excrement covered his face and head and caused him to close his mouth again in a hurry and crouch silent and shivering in the icy cold. Just then Jia Qiang came running up:

'Hurry! hurry! You can go now.'

At the word of command Jia Rui bounded out of his hole and sprinted for dear life through the rear gate and back to his own home. It was now past midnight, and he had to shout for someone to let him in. When the servant who answered the gate saw the state he was in and asked him how it had happened, he had to pretend that he had been out in the darkness to ease himself and had fallen into the jakes. Then rushing into his own room he stripped off his clothes and washed, his mind running all the time on how Xi-feng had tricked him. The thought of her trickery provoked a surge of hatred in his soul; yet even as he hated her, the vision of her loveliness made him long to clasp her to his breast. Torn by these violent and conflicting emotions, he passed the whole night without a single wink of sleep.

From that time on, though he longed for Xi-feng with unabated passion, he never dared to visit the Rong-guo mansion again. Jia Rong and Jia Qiang, on the other hand, came frequently to his house to ask for their money, so that he was in constant dread of his grandfather finding out about the IOUs.

Unable, even now, to overcome his longing for Xi-feng, saddled with a heavy burden of debt, harassed during the daytime by the schoolwork set him by his exacting grandfather, worn-out during the nights by the

excessive hand-pumping inevitable in an unmarried man of twenty whose mistress was both unattainable and constantly in his thoughts, twice frozen, tormented and forced to flee - what constitution could withstand so many shocks and strains without succumbing in the end to illness? The symptoms of Jia Rui's illness—a palpitation in the heart, a loss of taste in the mouth, a weakness in the hams, a smarting in the eyes, feverishness by night and lassitude by day, albumen in the urine and blood-flecks in the phlegm—had all manifested themselves within less than a year. By that time they had produced a complete breakdown and driven him to his bed, where he lay, with eyes tight shut, babbling deliriously and inspiring terror in all who saw him. Physicians were called in to treat him and some bushels of cinnamon bark, autumn root, turtle-shell, black leek and Solomon's seal must at one time and another have been in-fused and taken without the least observable effect.

Winter went and spring came and Jia Rui's sickness grew even worse. His grandfather Dai-ru was in despair. Medical advice from every quarter had been taken and none of it had proved effective. The most recent advice was that the patient should be given a pure decoction of ginseng without admixture of other ingredients. So costly a remedy was far beyond Dai-ru's resources and he was obliged to go to the Rong-guo mansion to beg. Lady Wang ordered Wang Xi-feng to weigh out two ounces for him from their own supplies.

'The other day when we were making up a new lot of pills for Grandmother,' said Xi-feng, 'you told me to keep any of the remaining whole roots for a medicine you were sending to General Yang's wife. I sent her the medicine yesterday, sol am afraid we haven't any left.'

'Well, even if *we* haven't got any,' said Lady Wang, 'you can send to your mother-in-law's for some; and probably they will have some at your Cousin Zhen's. Between you you ought somehow or other to be able to raise enough to give him. If you can save a man's life by doing so, you will have performed a work of merit.'

But though Xi-feng pretended to do as Lady Wang suggested, in fact she made no such inquiries. She merely scraped a few drams of broken bits together and sent them to Dai-ru with a message that 'Lady Wang had instructed her to send this, and it was all they had.' To Lady Wang, however, she reported that she had asked the others and altogether obtained more than two ounces of ginseng which she had sent to Dai-ru.

Jia Rui now wanted desperately to live and eagerly swallowed every medicine that they offered him; but all was a waste of money, for nothing seemed to do him any good. One day a lame Taoist appeared at the door asking for alms and claiming to be able to cure retributory illnesses. Jia Rui, who chanced to overhear him, called out from his bed:

'Quick, tell the holy man to come in and save me!' and as he called, he kotowed with his head on the pillow. The servants were obliged to bring the Taoist into the bedroom. Jia Rui clung to him tenaciously.

'Holy one, save me!' he cried out again and again.

The Taoist sighed.

'No medicine will cure your sickness. However, I have a precious thing here that I can lend you which, if you will look at it every day, can be guaranteed to save your life.'

So saying, he took from his satchel a mirror which had reflecting surfaces on both its sides. The words A MIRROR FOR THE ROMANTIC were inscribed on the back. He handed it to Jia Rui.

'This object comes from the Hall of Emptiness in the Land of Illusion. It was fashioned by the fairy Disenchantment as an antidote to the ill effects of impure mental activity. It has life-giving and restorative properties and has been brought into the world for the contemplation of those intelligent and handsome young gentlemen whose hearts are too susceptible to the charms of beauty. I lend it to you on one important condition: you must only look into the back of the mirror. Never, never under any circumstances look into the front. Three days hence I shall come again to reclaim it, by which time I guarantee that your illness will have gone.'

With that he left, at a surprising speed, ignoring the earnest entreaties of those present that he should stay longer.

‘This is intriguing!’ Jia Rui thought to himself when the Taoist gave him the mirror. ‘Let me try looking into it as he says, and holding it up to his face he looked into the back as instructed and saw a grinning skull, which he covered up hastily with a curse:

‘Silly old fool, to scare me like that! - But let me see what happens when I look into the other side!’

He turned the mirror round and looked, and there inside was Xi-feng beckoning to him to enter, and his ravished soul floated into the mirror after her. There they performed the act of love together, after which she saw him out again. But when he found himself once more back in his bed he stared and cried out in horror: for the mirror, of its own accord, had turned itself round in his hand and the same grinning skull faced him that he had seen before. He could feel the sweat trickling all over his body and lower down in the bed a little pool of semen that he had just ejaculated.

Yet still he was not satisfied, and turned the face of the mirror once more towards him. Xi-feng was there beckoning to him again and calling, and again he went in after her. He did this three or four times. But the last time, just as he was going to return from the mirror, two figures approached him holding iron chains which they fastened round him and by which they proceeded to drag him away. He cried out as they dragged him:

‘Walt! Let me take the mirror with me . . .!

Those were the last words he ever uttered.

To those who stood around the bed and watched him while this was happening he appeared first to be holding up the mirror and looking into it, then to let it drop; then to open his eyes in a ghastly stare and pick it up again; then, as it once more fell from his grasp, he finally ceased to move.

When they examined him more closely they found that his breathing had already stopped and that underneath his body there was a large, wet, icy patch of recently ejaculated semen.

At once they lifted him from the bed and busied themselves with the laying-out, while old Dai-ru and his wife abandoned themselves to a paroxysm of grief. They cursed the Taoist for a necromancer and ordered the servants to heap up a fire and cast the mirror upon the flames. But just at that moment a voice was heard in the air saying, ‘Who told him to look in the front? It is you who are to blame, for confusing the unreal with the real! Why then should you burn my mirror ?’

Suddenly the mirror was seen to rise up and fly out of the room, and when Dai-ru went outside to look, there was the lame Taoist asking for it back. He snatched it as it flew towards him and disappeared before Dai-ru’s very eyes.

Seeing that there was to be no redress, Dai-yu was obliged to set about preparing for the funeral and began by announcing his grandson’s death to everybody concerned. Reading of the sutras began on the third day and on the seventh the coffin was drawn in procession to temporary lodging in the Temple of the Iron Threshold to await future reburial. The various members of the Jia family all came in due course to offer their condolences. From the Rong-guo side Jia She and Jia Zheng each gave twenty taels of silver and from the Ning-guo side Cousin Zhen also gave twenty taels. The other members of the clan gave amounts varying from one to four taels according to their means. A collection made among the parents of the dead man’s fellow-students raised an additional twenty or thirty taels. Although Dai-ru’s means were slender, with so much monetary help coming in he was able to perform the whole business in considerable style.

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Towards the end of the year in which Jia Rui's troubles started Lin Ru-hai fell seriously ill and wrote a letter asking to see Dai-yu again. Though Grandmother Jia was plunged into deepest gloom by the letter, she was obliged to prepare with all possible expedition for her granddaughter's departure. And Bao-yu, though he too was distres8ed at the prospect of Dai-yu's leaving him, could scarcely seek to interfere in a matter affecting the natural feelings of a father and his child. Grandmother Jia insisted that Jia Lian should accompany Dai-yu and see her safely there and back. The various gifts to be taken and the journey-money were, it goes without saying, duly prepared. A suitable day on which to commence the journey was quickly determined and Jia Lian and Dai-yu took leave of all the rest and, embarking with their attendants, set sail for Yangchow.

If you wish for further details, you may learn them in the following chapter.

CHAPTER 13

Qin-shi posthumously acquires the status
of a Noble Dame
And Xi-feng takes on the management
of a neighbouring establishment

After *Jia* Lian's departure for Yangchow Xi-feng felt bored and unhappy, particularly in the evenings when, apart from chatting with Patience) there seemed little to do but sleep. On the occasion of which we write she had sat beside the lamp with Patience until late into the evening; then, the bedding having been well warmed, the two women had gone to bed, where they lay until after midnight discussing the stages of Jia Lian's journey and attempting to calculate what point he was likely to have reached in it. By this time Patience was fast asleep and Xi-feng herself was on the point of dropping off when she became dimly aware that Qin-shi had just walked into the room from outside.

'So fond of sleep, Auntie?' said Qin-shi with a gentle smile. 'I shall have to begin my journey today without you to see me off. But never mind! Since you cannot come to me, I have come to you instead. We two have always been so dose, I could not have borne to leave you without saying good-bye. Besides, I have a last wish that you alone must hear, because I cannot trust anyone else with it.'

'What is your wish?' Xi-feng heard herself asking. 'You can trust me to carry it out for you.'

'Tell me, Auntie,' said Qin-shi, 'how is it that you who are such a paragon among women that even strong men find mote than their match in you can yet be ignorant of the simple truths expressed in homely proverbs? Take this one:

The full moon smaller grows,
Full water overflows.

Or this:

The higher the climb, the harder the fall.

Our house has now enjoyed nearly a century of dazzling success. Suppose one day "joy at its height engenders sorrow".

And suppose that, in the words of another proverb, "when the tree falls, the monkeys scatter". Will not

our reputation as one of the great, cultured households of the age then turn into a hollow mockery?'

Qin-shi's question made Xi-feng feel uneasy, though at the same time inspiring a deep respect in her for her niece's foresight.

'You are quite right to show concern,' she said. 'Is there any means by which we can keep permanently Out of danger?'

'Now you are being silly, Auntie!' said Qin-shi somewhat scornfully. '"The extreme of adversity is the beginning of prosperity" - and the reverse of that saying is also true. Honour and disgrace follow each other in an unending cycle. No human power can arrest that cycle and hold it permanently in one position. What you *can* do, however, is to plan while we are still prosperous for the kind of heritage that will stand up to the hard times when they come.

'At the moment everything seems well looked after; but in fact there are still two matters that have not been properly taken care of. If you will deal with them in the way that I shall presently suggest, you will be able to face the future without fear of calamity.'

'What two matters ?' Xi-feng asked her.

'Though the seasonal offerings at the ancestral burial-ground are at present regularly attended to,' said Qin-shi, 'no special income has been set aside to pay for them. That is the first matter. The second matter concerns the clan school. There again, there is no fixed source of income. Obviously there will be no lack of funds either for the seasonal offerings or for the school as long as we enjoy our present prosperity. But where is the money for them coming from in the future, when the family has fallen on hard times?

'I am convinced that the only way of dealing with these two matters is to invest now, while we are still rich and powerful, in as much property as possible—land, farms, and houses—in the area around the burial-ground, and to pay for the seasonal offerings and the running of the school entirely out of the income from this property. Moreover the school itself ought to be situated on it. The whole clan, old and young alike, should be convened and a set of regulations drawn up whereby each family is made to administer the estate and look after the financing of the seasonal offerings and the clan school for one year in turn. By making the responsibility rotate in a fixed order you will remove the possibility of quarrels about it and also lessen the danger of the property getting mortgaged or sold.

'Then even if the clan gets into trouble and its possessions are confiscated, this part of its property, as charitable estate, will escape confiscation; and when the family's fortunes are in decline, it will be a place where the young people can go to farm and study, as well as a means of maintaining the ancestral sacrifices in unbroken succession. To refuse to take thought for the morrow on the grounds that our present prosperity is going to last for ever would be extremely short-sighted.

'Quite soon a happy event is going to take place in this family, bringing it an even greater glory than it has enjoyed up to now. But it will be a glory as excessive and as transitory as a posy of fresh flowers pinned to an embroidered dress or the flare-up of spilt cooking-oil on a blazing fire. In the midst of that brief moment of happiness never forget that "even the best party must have an end". For if you do, and if you fail to take precautions in good time, you will live to regret it bitterly when it is already too late.'

'What is this happy event you speak of?' Xi-feng asked her eagerly.

'That is a secret which may not be revealed to mortal ears. However, for the sake of our brief friendship on this earth, I leave you these words as my parting gift. Be sure that you remember them well!

When the Three Springs have gone, the flowering time will end,
And each one for himself as best he may must fend.'

Xi-feng was about to ask her another question when she was interrupted by the sound of the iron chime-bar which hung in the inner gate.

Four strokes. The signal of death!

She woke with a start to hear a servant announcing, ‘Mrs Rong of the Ning-guo mansion is dead.’ A cold sweat broke out over her body and for a while she lay too stunned to move. Then forcing herself to get up she pulled on her clothes and went round to Lady Wang’s.

By this time the entire household had heard the news. All seemed bewildered by it and all were in one way or another deeply distressed. Those older than Qin-shi thought of how dutiful she had always been; those in her own generation thought of her warmth and friendliness; her juniors remembered how kindly and lovingly she had treated them; even the servants, irrespective of sex and age, remembering her compassion for the poor and humble and her gentle concern for the old and the very young, all wept and lamented as loud and bitterly as the rest. but we digress.

During the last few days, since Dai-yu’s return to her father had deprived him of her companionship, Bao-yu, far from seeking diversion in the company of the others, had kept to himself, going to bed early every night and sleeping disconsolately on his own. The news of Qin-shi’s death came to him in the midst of his dreams, causing him to start up in bed with a jerk. A sudden stabbing pain shot through his heart. He retched involuntarily and spat out a mouthful of blood. Aroma and the maids clung to him, terrified, and asked him what was the matter. They wanted to tell Grandmother Jia and ask her to send for a doctor; but Bao-yu would not hear of it.

‘Don’t worry, it’s of no consequence!’ he told them. ‘Something that happens when a sudden rush of fire to the heart prevents the blood from getting back into the right channels.’

He climbed Out of bed as he spoke and told them to bring him some clean clothes, so that he could see his grandmother and then go straight on to the other house. Aroma was still concerned for him, but seeing him so determined, allowed him to have his way.

Grandmother Jia did not want him to go, either.

‘It won’t be clean there,’ she said, ‘with her scarcely yet cold. And besides, there’s a nasty wind at this time of night. It will be soon enough if you go there first thing tomorrow.’

But Bao-yu would not be gainsaid, so she gave instructions for a carriage to be made ready for him and a numerous retinue of servants to attend him there.

Arriving in haste at the entrance of the Ning-guo mansion, they found the gates flung wide open and lanterns on either side turning the night into noonday. Despite the hour, a multitude of people were hurrying through it in both directions, while from inside the house issued a sound of lamentation that seemed to shake the very buildings to their foundations.

Alighting from his carriage, Bao-yu hurried through to the room in which Qin-shi lay and wept there for a while very bitterly. He then went to call on You-shi, whom he found ill in bed, struck down by a sudden attack of some gastric trouble from which she had occasionally suffered in the past. After leaving You-shi, he went to look for Cousin Zhen.

By now Jia Dai-ru, Jia Dai-xiu, Jia Chi, Jia Xiao, Jia Dun, Jia She, Jia Zheng, Jia Cong, *Jia* Bin, Jia Heng (I), Jia Guang, Jia Chen, Jia Qiong, Jia Lin, Jia Qiang, Jia Chang, Jia Ling, Jia Yun, Jia Qin, Jia Jin, Jia Ping, Jia Zao, Jia Heng (II), Jia Fen, Jia Fang, Jia Lan, Jia Jun and Jia Zhi had all arrived, and Bao-yu found Cousin Zhen in their midst addressing them, though well-nigh choked with tears:

‘Everyone, young or old, kinsman or friend, knows that my daughter-in-law was ten times better than any son. Now that she has been taken from us it’s plain to see that this senior branch of the family is doomed to extinction~’ and he broke down once more into incontrollable weeping.

The men present tried to console him:

‘Now that she’s gone, crying isn’t going to bring her back again. The important thing now is to make your plans for the funeral.’

‘Plans? What plans ?’ Cousin Zhen cried, somewhat theatrically. ‘Just take everything I have—everything!’

As he was speaking Qin Bang-ye and Qin Zhong arrived, and various members of You-shi's family, including her two younger sisters. Cousin Zhen deputed Jia Qiong, Jia Chen, Jia Lin and Jia Qiang from among the younger men present to look after them and any other guests who might arrive.

He also instructed someone to invite an expert from the Board of Astronomy to select dates for the funeral and the ceremonies preceding it. With the approval of this official it was decided that the lying in state should be for forty-nine days and that the notification of bereavement indicating the family's readiness to receive official visits of condolence should bb made in three days' time. A hundred and eight Buddhist monks were engaged to perform a Grand Misericordia for the salvation of all departed souls in the main reception hall of the mansion during these forty-nine day8, while at the same time ninety-nine Taoist priests of the Quanzhen sect were to perform ceremonies of purification and absolution at a separate altar in the Celestial Fragrance pavilion. These arrangements having been made, the body was moved to a temporary shrine in another pavilion of the All-scents Garden. Fifty high-ranking Buddhist monks and fifty high-ranking Taoist priests took turns in chanting and intoning before it on every seventh day.

Nothing would induce old Jia Jing to return home when he learned of the death of his grandson's wife. Immortality was within his grasp and he was not going to impair his hard-won sanctity with the taint of earthly pollution. Accordingly he left all these matters to Cousin Zhen to order as he wished.

Free to indulge his own extravagant tastes, Cousin .Zhen had inspected several sets of deal coffin-boards without finding any to his liking. Xue Pan heard of his problem when he came round to condole.

'We've got a set in our timber-yard,' he told Cousin Zhen. 'It's in a wood supposed to have come from the Iron Net Mountains. They say that a coffin made from it will last for ever without totting. It was brought here years ago by my father. Prince Zhong-yi was going to have it, but when he came unstuck it didn't get used. It's still locked up in store because no one has ever been found who could afford to buy it. If you are interested, I can have it carried round for you to look at.'

Cousin Zhen was delighted, and the timber was brought over at once for everyone to inspect. The planks for the base and sides were at least eight inches thick. The wood had a grain like areca palm and a fragrance suggestive of musk and sandalwood. When rapped with the knuckles it gave off a hard, ringing sound like jade or stone. Everyone was impressed and Cousin Zhen eagerly inquired the price. Xue Pan laughed.

'I doubt you could buy a set like this for a thousand taels of silver cash down,' he said. 'Blow the price! Give the workmen a couple of taels for carrying it here and it's yours.'

Cousin Zhen thanked him profusely and at once gave orders for the planks to be sawn up and made into a coffin. Jia Zheng doubted the propriety of using such material for the burial of a person not of royal blood and insisted that it would be sufficient to use the best quality deal; but Cousin Zhen refused to listen.

News was suddenly brought that Qin-shi's little maid Gem, on hearing that her mistress was dead, had taken her own life by dashing her head against a pillar. Such rare devotion excited the wondering admiration of the entire clan. Cousin Zhen at once had her laid out and encoffined with the rites appropriate to a granddaughter and ordered her coffin to be placed in the Ascension Pavilion of the All-scents Garden side by side with Qin-shi's.

As Qin-shi had died without issue, another of her little maids called Jewel volunteered to stand in as her daughter and perform the chief mourner's duties of smashing the bowl when the bearers came in to take up the coffin and walking in front of it in the funeral procession. Cousin Zhen was very pleased and gave orders that thenceforth everyone was to address her as *'Miss* Jewel' just as if she were Qin-shi's real daughter. In the meantime she installed herself by the coffin and, comporting herself in the manner prescribed for an unmarried daughter, wept and wailed until she had almost lost her voice.

Following these preliminaries, the rest of the clan together with the family servants all proceeded to carry out their mourning duties according to long-established precedents and in a correct and orderly manner. The family's respect for tradition was, however, a source of great unease to Cousin Zhen when he reflected on Jia

Rong's status: for Jia Rong was only an Imperial College Student - an absurdly insignificant title to write on a funeral banner; and the insignia to which Qin-shi was entitled would make a very poor showing when borne in the funeral procession.

By a stroke of luck the fourth day of the first seven-day period—the day on which official condolences were scheduled to begin - brought a visit from Dai Quan, the Eunuch Chamberlain of the Da-ming Palace. Having sent his representative along well in advance with offerings for the departed spirit, he presently arrived himself, seated in a great palanquin and preceded by criers and men with gongs clearing the streets before him, to present his offerings in person. Cousin Zhen at once made up his mind to take advantage of the visit.

As soon as Dai Quan had made his offering, Cousin Zhen ushered him into the Honey Bee Gallery, invited him to be seated, and served him with tea. Then, entering into conversation with his guest, he quickly found occasion to mention the fact that he was thinking of purchasing a place for his son Jia Rong. The eunuch guessed what was in his mind, and laughingly inquired whether it was not with a view to adding a little pomp to the funeral that he had conceived this notion.

'My dear Chamberlain,' Cousin Zhen readily agreed, you have hit the nail on the head I'

'Well, by a lucky coincidence,' said Dai Quan, 'there is rather a good place going at this very moment. The Corps of Officers of the Imperial Guard, which has an establishment of three hundred, has got two vacancies in it. Yesterday Lord Xiang-yang's younger brother "Sannikins" begged me for one of them and sent fifteen hundred taels of silver round to my house to pay for it. He and I have always been good friends, as you know, and in any case I felt I had to do something, for his Grandpa's sake; so I couldn't very well refuse. "Piggy" Feng, the Military Governor of Yong-xing, has asked me if he can buy the remaining place for his son, but I haven't yet had time to give him a reply. If our young friend here wants it, why not jot down his particulars and I'll see what I can do.'

Cousin Zhen at once ordered someone to write out Jia Rong's name, age and lineage on a sheet of **red** paper. The following description was hurriedly prepared and handed to Dai Quan for his inspection:

Name: JIA RONG

Place of Origin: (County) Kiangning; (Prefecture) Ying-tian-fu; (Province) Kiangnan.

Status: Imperial College Student

*Age:*20

Great-grandfather: General Jia Dai-hua, C.-in-C. Metropolitan Barracks, hereditary noble of the first rank.

Grandfather: Jia *Jing,* Palace Graduate of the year 17—.

Father: Hon. Colonel Jia Zhen, third rank (hereditary).

After glancing through it quickly, Dai Quan handed it into the keeping of a young eunuch secretary at his side.

'When we get back,' he said to the latter, 'give this to old Zhao, the President of the Board of Revenue, with my compliments, and ask him if he would kindly make out a commission for a captain in the Imperial Guard, fifth rank, and also the papers to go with it with these particulars filled in. Tell him I'll call round tomorrow to pay in the money.'

The young eunuch bowed, and Dai Quan rose to go. Seeing that he could no longer detain him, Cousin Zhen showed him Out as far as the main gate. As the eunuch was getting into his palanquin, Cousin Zhen asked him whether he should take the money to the Ministry or bring it round to Dai Quan's own house.

'Better bring a thousand taels, standard weight, to my house. If you go to the Ministry, they're sure to fleece you.'

Cousin Zhen thanked him warmly.

'When the period of mourning is over,' he said, 'I shall bring the young fellow round to

your house to kotow his thanks.'

With that they parted. But no sooner had the eunuch gone than the sound of criers was once more heard in the street, this time heralding the arrival of the Marchioness of Zhongjing, wife of Grandmother Jia's nephew Shi Ding, with her little niece Shi Xing-yun. Lady Wang, Lady Xing and Wang Xi-feng received them in Cousin Zhen's drawing-room.

> Offerings from the Marquises of Jin-xiang and Chuan-ning and the Earl of Shou-shan were now on display, and those three gentlemen were shortly to be observed alighting from their palanquins outside. Cousin Zhen went Out to meet them and conducted them up the steps into the main reception hall.

From then on there was a continuous stream of arrivals, and throughout the whole forty-nine-day period the street in front of the Ning-guo mansion was thronged with family mourners in white and mandarins in their' colourful robes of office, milling in and out and to and fro all day long.

The day after Dai Quan's visit Cousin Zhen made Jia kong change Out of mourning into a court dress and go to collect his commission. The furnishings and insignia in the shrine were all rearranged in a manner befitting a person of the fifth rank. The wording on the spirit tablet which stood on the table of offerings at the foot of the coffin now read.

Spirit tablet. of the Lady Qin-shi of the Jia family
Gentlewoman of the Fifth Rank by Imperial Patent

The gate of the All-scents Garden opening on to the street was thrown wide open and booths for musicians were erected on either side of it, in which black-coated funeral bands played at fixed times throughout the day. To either side of them were displayed the insignia of rank: glittering rows of axes and halberds arranged in wooden stands. At each side of the gateway vermilion-painted boards inscribed in large golden characters boldly announced the status of the bereaved:

Honorary Captain of the Imperial Bodyguard
Inner Palace, Northern Capital Division

Inside the gateway, facing the street, a high staging was constructed on which Buddhist monks and Taoist priests sat on opposite sides of an altar intoning their sacred texts. In front of the staging was a notice on which was written in large characters:

FUNERAL OBSEQUIES

OF

THE LADY QIN-SHI

Senior great-great-granddaughter-in-law of
Jia Yan, Hereditary Duke of Ning-guo, and
wife of the *Right Honourable Jia* Rong, Captain
in the Imperial Bodyguard) Inner Palace:

WHEREAS
in this favoured Country, situate in the centre-
most part of the four continents of the earth,
on which it has pleased Heaven to bestow the
blessings of everlasting prosperity and peace,

WE,

the Very Reverend *Wan-xu*, Co-President of the Board of Commissioners having authority over all monks and clergy of the Incorporeal, EverAranquil Church of the *Lord Buddha*,

and

the Venerable *Ye-sheng*, Co-President of the Board of Commissioners having authority over all priests and practitioners of the Primordial, All-unifying Church of the *Heavenly Tao*,

HAVE,
with all due reverence and care, prepared offices for the salvation of all departed souls, supplicating *Heaven* and calling upon the Name of the *Lord Buddha*.

NOW,
earnestly praying and beseeching the Eighteen Guardians of the Sangha, the Warlike Guardians of the Law, and the Twelve Guardians of the Months mercifully to extend their holy compassion towards us, but terribly to blaze forth in divine majesty against the powers of evil, we do solemnly perform for nine and forty days the Great Mass for the purification, deliverance and salvation of all souls on land and on sea...

—and a great deal more on those lines which it would be tedious to repeat.

*

Although Cousin Zhen now had every reason to feel satisfied with his arrangements, there was still one matter which caused him uneasiness. You-shi's unfortunate illness meant that she was unable to discharge any of her social obligations, and he was mortally afraid that with so many great ladies coming to the house on visits of condolence, some breach of etiquette might occur which would cause the family to look ridiculous.

Bao-yu once chanced to be sitting next to him when his mind was dwelling on this problem, and observing the gloomy and preoccupied expression on his cousin's face, asked him why he should still be worried now that everything had been so excellently taken care of. Cousin Zhen explained that it was the present lack of a responsible female head of household which was the cause of his concern.

'That's no problem!' said Bao-yu encouragingly. 'I know just the person for this. Put her in temporary control here for a month, and I guarantee that you will have nothing further to worry about.'

'Who?' inquired Cousin Zhen eagerly.

Bao-yu deemed it imprudent to mention her name out loud in the hearing of so many friends and relations, so leaning across he whispered it in Cousin Zhen's ear. Cousin Zhen's reaction was ecstatic.

'Yes, absolutely the right person!' he cried. 'Let's see about it straight away!'

And seizing Bao-yu by the hand, he excused himself to the company and hurried round to the reception

room in his own apartment.

It so happened that this day was not one of the seven on which masses were said, so visitors from outside the family were fairly few. In the inner apartments there was only a handful of lady visitors, all of them close connections of the Jia family, whom Lady Xing, Lady Wang, Wang Xi-feng and various female members of the clan were keeping company. When a servant announced The Master is here', all these females jumped up with little shrieks of alarm and rushed off to hide themselves—all, that is, except Xi-feng, who rose slowly to her feet and imperturbably stood her ground.

Cousin Zhen had of late been feeling far from well. The debility his sickness caused him had been further aggravated by excessive grief and obliged him to support himself with a staff**.** Lady Xig was concerned to see the pitiflil' figure he presented as he entered the room.

'You are not well,' she said, 'and you have been doing too much now for days. You ought to be getting some rest. What do you want to come in here for?'

Clutching his staff in his hand, Cousin Zhen struggled down on to his knees, and having made his duty to his aunts, began thanking them for all their trouble. Lady Xing hurriedly ordered Bao-yu to raise him up and commanded a chair to be moved forward for him to sit on. But Cousin Zhen refused to be seated.

'I have come to ask you three ladies a favour,' he said, forcing his woebegone features into a smile.

'What is it you want?' Lady Xing asked him.

'As you doubtless know,' said Cousin Zhen, 'my wife has been ill in bed ever since our daughter-in-law's death, and with no one to run her side of the household it has been getting into a pretty deplorable state. I should like to ask Cousin Feng if she could possibly see her way to running things here for us during the coming month. It would be a great relief to me if she could.'

'So that's what you want!' said Lady Xing with a smile. 'Feng is now part of your Aunt Wang's establishment. You'd better talk to *her* about it.'

'She's only a child yet; you know,' Lady Wang put in hastily. 'What experience has she ever had of *this* kind of thing? Suppose she proved not quite up to the task. We should all be made to look ridiculous. I think you had better trouble someone else.'

'I can easily guess what is in your mind, Aunt,' said Cousin Zhen. 'You are afraid we should overwork her. For I assure you there is no question of her not being a good enough manager. Even in her childhood games, Cousin Feng had the decisiveness of a little general, and since she's married and had some experience of running things next door, she is a thoroughly seasoned campaigner. I've thought the matter over carefully these past few days and am quite convinced that apart from Cousin Feng there really isn't anyone else I can ask. If you won't let her do this for my sake or my wife's sake, at least won't you let her for the sake of the one who has just died?'

And at this point he burst into tears.

Lady Wang's only concern had been lest Xi-feng, who had had no experience of large-scale funerals, might find the task too big for her and perhaps end up by making a fool of herself. But Cousin Zhen's moving plea caused her attitude to soften considerably and she eyed Xi-feng thoughtfully as though struggling to make up her mind. Xi-feng for her part had always loved managing things and enjoyed showing off her ability to do so. When Cousin Zhen first made his request, her mind had at once consented; and now, observing that Lady Wang appeared to be already half persuaded, she hastened to complete the process.

'Cousin Zhen has spoken su eloquently. Oughtn't we perhaps to agree, Aunt?'

'Do you think you can do it?' Lady Wang asked her in a low aside.

'I don't see why not,' said Xi-feng. 'Cousin Zhen has already seen to all the outside

arrangements himself. It's only a question of looking after the domestic side for a bit. And even if there is anything I don't know about, I can always ask you.'

This seemed reasonable enough to Lady Wang, so she said nothing. Seeing that Xi-feng herself appeared to be willing, Cousin Zhen turned to her with a smile.

'Actually there isn't so very much to do,' he said. 'You really must let us persuade you to take this on. Let me make you a reverence now, to show my gratitude. Then, when this is all over, I shall come round to your place to thank you properly.'

So saying, he clasped his hands before him and made her a formal bow. Xi-feng hurriedly curtseyed back.

Cousin Zhen now ordered someone to fetch the tallies for the entire Ning-guo household and instructed Bao-yu to hand them to Xi-feng.

'I want you to manage things whatever way you like,' he told her. 'Anything you want you can get by using one of these. There is no need to ask me for it. I have only two reqsts to make of you. First that you should dismiss from your mind any idea of trying to save me any money. The important thing is to put on a good show: the expense doesn't matter. And secondly that you should treat our people here exactly as you treat the members of your own household. Don't be afraid of upsetting them. Provided that you will observe those conditions, I leave everything in your hands with the utmost confidence.'

Xi-feng watched Lady Wang, not daring to accept the tallies without her approval.

'You hear what your cousin says,' said Lady Wang. 'You bad better do as he asks. Only do not take too much upon yourself. If there are any decisions to make, be sure to ask Cousin Zhen or his wife first.'

Bao-yu had already received the tallies from Cousin Zhen and now thrust them at Xi-feng. For politeness' sake she feigned a certain amount of reluctance, but was soon prevailed upon to accept them.

'Will you stay here with us,' Cousin Zhen asked her, 'or will you be coming over every day from the other house? If you intend to come over from the other house every day, it will greatly add to your burdens. We have an apartment here with its own courtyard which we can very quickly place at your disposal. If you would care to move in for the next week or two, I am sure we could make you comfortable.'

'Thank you, but it won't be necessary,' said Xi-feng with a smile. 'I am needed at the other house too, so it will be best if I come here every day.'

Having accomplished his mission, Cousin Zhen stayed chatting a little longer and then left. Presently, when the visiting ladies had dispersed, Lady Wang asked Xi-feng what her plans were for the rest of the day.

'Please go on without me, Aunt,' said Xi-feng. 'Before I go back myself I must first try to sort out exactly what this job is going to entail.'

Lady Wang accordingly left without more delay in the company of Lady Xing, and the two ladies returned to the Rong-guo mansion, where we must now leave them.

Alone at last, Xi-feng wandered into a sort of penthouse building where she sat down and tried to formulate the task that lay ahead. Five major abuses, long habitual in the Ning-guo establishment, presented themselves to her mind as being specially in need of attention, viz:

*1.*Because it was so large and so motley an establishment, things were always getting lost.

*2.*Because there was no rational division of labour, it always seemed to be someone else's responsibility whenever a job needed to be done.

*3.*Because the household's expenditure was so lavish, money was always getting misappropriated or

misspent.

4.Because no distinctions were made between one job and another, the rewards and hardships were unfairly distributed,

5.Because the servants were so arrogant and undisciplined, those with face' could brook no restraint and those without could win no advancement.

If you want to know how Xi-feng dealt with these abuses, you will have to read the chapter which follows.

CHAPTER 14

Lin Ru-hai is conveyed to his last
resting-place in Soochow
And Jia Bao-yu is presented to the Prince of
Bei-jing at a roadside halt

When Lai Sheng, the Chief Steward of the Ning-guo mansion, learned that Xi-feng had been invited to take on the management of the household, he called his cronies together and addressed them in the following terms:

'Well lads, it seems that they've called in Mrs Lian from the other house to run things here for a bit; so if she should happen to come round asking for anything or have occasion to talk to you about anything, be sure to do what she says, won't you? During this coming month we shall all have to start work a bit earlier and knock off a bit later than usual. If you'll put up with a little extra hardship just for this month, we can make up for it by taking things easy when it's over. Anyway, I'm relying on you not to let me down. She's well known for a sour-faced, hard-hearted bitch is this one, and once she's got her back up, she'll give no quarter, no matter who you are. So be careful!'

There was a chorus of agreement from the rest. One of them did observe, half-jokingly, that 'by rights they could do with someone like her to straighten things up a bit, considering the state they had got into'. But just at that moment Brightie's wife arrived on a mission from Xi-feng. She was to take receipt of some ledger-paper, buckram, and book4abels, and had a tally in her hand and a slip of paper specifying the quantities required. The men pressed round her offering her a place to sit and a cup of tea to drink while one of them hurried off with the list to fetch the needed items. Not only that, but, having fetched them, he carried them for her all the way to the inner gate of the mansion, only handing them to her then so that she could take them in to Xi-feng by herself. Xi-feng at once ordered Sunshine to make them up into stout workbooks for use in the office. At the same time she sent for Lai Sheng's wife and asked her for the register of the household staff. She also told her to get in touch with all the married females on the staff and arrange for them to assemble first thing next morning to be told their new duties. Then, after roughly checking through the numbers in the 'establishment' sheet and questioning Lai Sheng's wife on a few points, she got into her carriage and drove back home.

At half past six next morning she was back at the Ning-guo mansion. By this time all the married women on the staff had been assembled. Not daring to go in, they hung about outside the window listening to Xi-feng discussing work-plans with Lai Sheng's wife inside the office. 'Now that I'm in charge here', they heard her telling the latter, 'I won't promise to make myself agreeable. I haven't got a sweet temper like your mistress, you know. You won't find *me* letting you do every-thing just as it suits you. So don't let me hear anyone saying "We don't do it that way here"! From now on, whatever it is, you do it the way I tell you to, and anyone who departs by as much as a hair's breadth from what I say is for it good and proper, no matter how senior or how important

she thinks she is!'

Having delivered herself of this formidable preliminary she ordered Sunshine to call the roll. One by one the women stepped into the office to be looked at. When she had looked at them all, Xi-feng proceeded to make her dispositions.

'This twenty here. I want you to divide yourselves into two shifts of ten. Your job every day will be to look after lady visitors and serve them tea. That's all you have to do. Nothing else.

'This twenty here. I want you divided into two shifts like the others. Your job will be serving tea and meals to the family. Nothing else.

'These forty. Again, two shifts. Your job is to look after the shrine: lighting fresh joss-sticks, keeping the lamps in oil, changing the drapes. You will also take turns by the spirit tablet, making offerings of rice and tea, kotowing when the visitors kotow, wailing when they wail. That is your job and nothing else besides.

'You four are to look after the cups and plates and so forth in the ladies' tea-room. If anything is missing, you share the responsibility between you and a quarter of the cost will be stopped Out of each of your wages.

'You four here are to look after the dinner-ware: bowls, wine-cups and the like. Anything missing will be stopped out of your wages.

'This eight here. I want you to take charge of all funeral offerings sent in from outside.

'This eight. I want you to look after oil, candles, and paper-offerings. I'm going to put the whole lot in your charge; then whenever any is needed somewhere, you must go to wherever it is and supply them with whatever amount I tell you to.

'This twenty here. I want you doing night duty by rota. You are to see that all the gates are locked and keep a look-out for fires. You'll also be responsible for keeping the outside properly swept.

'The rest of you are to be divided up between the different apartments. Each of you will be responsible for the things in your own apartment, from furniture and antique ware down to spittoons and dusters. If the tiniest sliver gets lost or broken, you will be held responsible and will be expected to make it good.

'Lai Sheng's wife will make a general inspection every day, and if she catches anyone idling or gambling or drinking or fighting or being difficult, she will at once bring them to me for dealing with. And there will be no favouritism. If I find you've done something wrong, I shan't care whether you've been in service here for three or four generations, it will make no difference to me.

'Well, now you all know the rules. Prom now on whenever any trouble occurs I shall know exactly who to hold responsible.

'Those who are used to working with me at the other place always have a watch handy, and everything they do, no matter how small a thing it is, is done at a fixed time. You may not have watches, but at least there is a clock in your master's drawing-room you can look at. So here are the main times to remember. At half past six I shall come over to hear the roll-call. At ten o'clock I take my lunch. I shall see people with reports to make or tallies to collect up to, but not after, eleven o'clock. At seven in the evening, as soon as the paper-offerings have been burnt, I shall make a personal tour of inspection; and when I get back from it, I shall issue those on night duty with their keys. Then next day I shall be back here again at half past six.

'I dare say we are all going to be a bit overworked during the days ahead, but I am sure your master will want to reward you all for your trouble when this is over.'

Xi-feng now proceeded to supervise the distribution of supplies of tea, oil, candles, feather-dusters, and brooms to some of her work-parties, and to issue others with tablecloths, chair-covers, cushions, mats, spittoons, footstools, and other furnishings, an entry of the amount supplied being made in the book as each consignment

was handed over.

A clear record now existed of what individuals were in charge of which parts of the household, what items they were responsible for, and what duties they were expected to perform. Gone now were the days when everyone picked the easiest tasks to do first and the less popular ones never got carried out; gone the convenient disorder in which objects had so easily strayed (no one ever knew how) from the rooms where they belonged. Even with the greatly increased coming and going occasioned by the bereavement, it was quieter now than it had been before, when muddle and confusion still prevailed. And the old idling and pilfering appeared to have been eradicated completely. Secure in her authority, respected and obeyed by all, Xi-feng might be forgiven for contemplating her achievement with a certain amount of satisfaction.

Meanwhile You-shi was still unwell and Cousin Zhen too crushed by his somewhat disproportionate grief to think much about eating and drinking. Xi-feng accordingly had all sorts of invalid slops for You-shi and tempting little delicacies for Cousin Zhen prepared in the kitchens of the Rong-guo mansion and sent over each day to the prostrate couple. Cousin Zhen reciprocated by instructing his own cooks to prepare dishes of the very highest quality exclusively for Xi-feng and having them carried round to her in her little penthouse office.

Xi-feng seemed quite tireless in the discharge of her extra duties. Every morning she would be over at the appointed the roll-call and would sit there alone in her office, never once emerging to mix with the young Ning-guo women of her own generation. Even when lady visitors arrived she remained in the office and took no part in their reception.

The Thirty-fifth had now arrived—an important day in the penitential cycle of seven times seven days preceding the funeral—and the monks in the main hall had reached a particularly dramatic part of their ceremonies. Having opened up a way for the imprisoned souls, the chief celebrant had succeeded by means of spells and incantations in breaking open the gates of hell. He had shone his light (a little hand-mirror) for the souls in darkness. He had confronted Yama, the Judge of the Dead. He had seized the demon torturers who resisted his progress. He had invoked Ksitigarbha, the Saviour King, to aid him. He had raised up a golden bridge, and now, by means of a little flag which he held aloft in one hand, was conducting over it those souls from the very deepest pit of hell who still remained undelivered.

Meanwhile the ninety-nine Taoists in the Celestial Fragrance Pavilion were on their knees offering up a written petition to the Three Pure Ones and calling on the Jade Emperor himself in his heavenly palace. Outside, on their high staging, with swinging of censers and scattering of little cakes for the hungry ghosts to feed on, Zen monks were performing the great Water Penitential. And in the shrine where the coffin stood, six young monks and six young nuns, magnificently attired in **scarlet** slippers and embroidered copes, sat before the spirit tablet quietly murmuring the *dharani* that would assist the soul of the dead woman on the most difficult part of its journey into the underworld. Everywhere there was a hum of activity.

Knowing that the day would be a busy one bringing a greater than usual number of visitors, Xi-feng had risen at four o'clock in the morning to begin her toilet. By the time she had completed it, paid her daily tribute to nature, washed her hands, drunk a few mouthfuls of milk, and rinsed out her mouth, it was already half past six and Brightie's wife, at the head of the other female domestics, had been waiting for some considerable time in the courtyard outside. At last she emerged and stepped into the waiting carriage. Two horn lanterns inscribed in large characters with the words

RONG-GUO HOUSE

were borne before her as she went.

The great gate of the Ning-guo mansion was hung with lanterns and there were rows of identical standard lanterns on each side of the gateway illuminating the entrance with the brightness of noonday and eerily emphasizing the whiteness of the mourning-clothes worn by the menservants lined up to receive the carriage. At their invitation it was drawn in through the centremost of the three gates. Then the men-servants retired and Xi-feng's own women hurried forward and raised the curtain of the carriage for her to descend. She did so, leaning on the shoulder of her maid Felicity, and the two women with the lanterns led her in, lighting the way for her as they went, while her other women closed in behind her and the women of the Ning-guo household advanced to meet her, curtseyed, and chorused their morning greetings. Xi-feng walked slowly through the All-scents Garden until she came to the shrine in the Ascension Pavilion. As soon as she caught sight of the coffin the tears, like pearls from a broken necklace, rolled in great drops down her cheeks. A number of pages were standing stiffly in the courtyard outside awaiting the command to set fire to the paper offerings. Xi-feng gave orders for them to begin and for tea to be offered up inside the shrine. At once there was a clash of cymbals followed by the mournful strains of a funeral band. An armchair had already been called for and set down facing the spirit tablet. In this Xi-feng now sat, and raising her voice to a shrill pitch, wept with abandon, whereupon the entire household, high and low, male and female, indoors and Out, responded by breaking into loud and prolonged lamentation.

Presently a representative of Cousin Zhen and You-shi arrived and begged Xi-feng to desist. Brightie's wife poured out a cup of tea for her to rinse her mouth with, and when she had sufficiently recovered herself she rose to her feet once more$_3$ took leave of various members of the clan who were present, and went off to her office in the penthouse.

An inspection of the roster showed that all the members of her work-parties were present except for one woman belonging to the group responsible for the reception of friends of the family. Someone was sent to fetch her, and presently the woman arrived, flustered and fearful. 'So it is you!' said Xi-feng with a chilling smile. I suppose you thought that because you have a somewhat more lady-like job than the rest, you could afford to disobey my orders!'

'Oh no, madam, indeed not!' said the woman. 'I've been coming extra early every day. It's only today, because I over-slept, that I'm a bit late. Please let me off this once, madam! It really is the first time.'

Just at that moment Xi-feng observed Wang Xing's wife from the Rong-guo mansion, peeping round the door as if looking for a chance to speak to her.

'Yes, what is it?' she asked, turning away from the offender but giving her no indication that she might go.

Wang Xing's wife approached and said that she wanted a tally authorizing the purchase of silk cord to be made up into carriage trimmings for the funeral. She handed Xi-feng a slip of paper on which the order was written. It specified the number of network trimmings that would be required for two large sedans, four small sedans, and four carriages, and the number of pounds of silk cord that would be required for that amount of network. Xi-feng made Sunshine read it out to her, and having satisfied herself that the figures were correct, told him to enter them in his book and to issue Wang Xing's wife with one of the Rong-guo tallies, whereupon the latter hurried off to complete her mission.

Xi-feng was about to address the latecomer when four more servants from the Rong-guo mansion came in asking for tallies. She told them to hand over the order-slips and made Sunshine read them out to her. Two of them contained errors, and Xi-feng flung them down and told the bearers to 'go away and come back when they had got their figures right'. The two of them went off crestfallen.

Xi-feng next observed Zhang Cai's wife hovering about at the edge of the room and asked her what she wanted.

'It's those carriage curtains, ma'am. We want the money *for* the tailor who made them up.' Xi-feng took the bill and told Sunshine to enter the figures from it in his book. But she would not authorize Zhang Cai's wife to pay for the tailoring until Wang Xing's wife had returned the tally for the material used and the buyer's receipt. There was a second piece of paper which Sunshine now read, requesting permission to purchase paper for the windows of Bao-yu's outer study, which had just been redecorated. This too Xi-feng kept, and made Sunshine enter the amount in his book. She told Zhang Cai's wife that the goods must be supplied first before any payment could be authorized.

'Tomorrow another one will be late and the day after that it will be someone else,' said Xi-feng turning to the still waiting offender, 'and before we know where we are we shall have no one turning up at all. I should have liked to let you off, but if I'm lenient with you the first time, it will be that much harder for me to deal with someone else the second time; so I am obliged to make an example of you.' Her face hardened as she pronounced sentence: 'Take her out and give her twenty strokes of the bamboo!'

Seeing that Xi-feng was really angry, the servants dared not show themselves slack in executing her command. The wretched woman was half-dragged from the room and the flogging administered in full view of the waiting throng, after which they came in again, the executioners to report that they had discharged their duty and their victim to thank Xi-feng for her punishment. Xi-feng threw down one of the Ning-guo tallies.

'Take this to Lai Sheng and tell him to stop a month's pay from her wages. If anyone is late tomorrow they will get forty strokes and the day after that it will be sixty. So if you enjoy being beaten you have only to come late for roll-call. Dismiss.'

The servants, including the shamefaced and silently weeping victim, trooped off to their various duties.

Now began a steady stream of servants from both households collecting and returning tallies, each of whom Xi-feng attended to in a brisk and efficient manner. From that day onwards the staff of the Ning-guo mansion realized lust how formidable Xi-feng could he and went about their duties in fear and trembling, not daring to idle or delay.

*

But let us now turn to Bao-yu. On this particular occasion, fearing that with so great an influx of visitors Qin Zhong might find himself somewhat overwhelmed, Bao-yu brought him round to Xi-feng's office for a quiet chat.

'Did you smell the food?' said Xi-feng with a laugh. (She was halfway through her lunch when they entered.) 'Come up on the kang and have some!'

'Thank you, but we have already eaten,' said Bao-yu.

'Here, or in the other house?'

'Catch me eating here with those clowns!' said Bao-yu. 'No, back at home, with Grandmother.'

He and Qin Zhong sat down, and presently Xi-feng finished her lunch. Just then a woman came in asking for a tally with which to obtain a fresh supply of oil for the altar lamps.

'I calculated that you would be needing some by now,' said Xi-feng with a smile. 'I thought you must have forgotten. If you *had* forgotten, you'd have had to pay for it yourself. That would have suited me down to the ground!'

‘Oh no, madam! As you say, I just forgot. I only thought of it a moment ago, and I realized that if I didn’t hurry I should be too late to get a tally.’

So saying, she took her tally and went. For a short while longer the handing over of tallies and registering of amounts continued.

‘Both your houses use these tallies for everything,’ said Qin Zhong, who had been watching these transactions with some interest. ‘Suppose some outsider were to forge one and use it to get a lot of money with?’

‘Not everyone is as crooked as you are!’ said Xi-feng good humouredly.

‘How is it that there is no one from *our* place coming in for tallies?’ Bao-yu asked.

‘At the time when *they* come,’ Xi-feng replied, ‘you are still fast asleep in bed. Now let me ask you something. When are you going to begin studying at night?’

‘I should like nothing better than to begin today,’ said Bao-yu. ‘But what can I do if they won’t get on with my study?’

If you were to ask me nicely,’ said Xi-feng jovially, ‘I think *I* could undertake to hurry them up for you.’

‘Oh, you’re no good,’ said Bao-yu, ‘no more than any of the rest. They’ll get round to it in time. It’s just a question of waiting till they do.’

‘Whether they get round to it or not,’ said Xi-feng, ‘they still need materials for the job, and they can’t get the materials if I don’t choose to give them the tallies—I can tell you that for sure!’

As soon as he heard this, Bao-yu twined himself round Xi-feng and began coaxing and wheedling her to give the workmen the tallies that would enable them to begin work on his study.

‘Stop it! Stop it! ‘ cried Xi-feng. ‘I am so tired that my bones ache. How can I stand up to being mauled about by a great-ape like you? You needn’t worry. They’ve just been round to see about paper for the windows. It would look pretty stupid if you were to send them off for something they have already got.’

Bao-yu refused to believe her until she made Sunshine look up the entry in his book and show it to him.

While Bao-yu was inspecting the book, a servant announced the arrival of Shiner, one of the boys who had accompanied Jia Lian to Yangchow. Xi-feng eagerly ordered him in. Shiner louted to his mistress in the Manchu fashion and hoped that she was well.

‘Why have you come back?’ said Xi-feng.

‘The Master sent me, ma’am. Mr. Lin died on the third at ten in the morning and the Master and Miss Lin are taking him to Soochow to be buried. They expect to be home by the end of the spring. The Master told me to bring back the news and to give everyone his regards, and he said I was to ask Her Old Ladyship for instructions. He also told me to see if you were getting on all right, ma’am; and he said would I take some fur-lined gowns back with me for winter wear.’

‘Have you seen anyone else yet?’ Xi-feng asked him.

‘Yes, everyone,’ said Shiner, and withdrew.

Xi-feng turned to Bao-yu with a smile:

‘It looks now as if your Cousin Lin will be staying with us permanently.’

‘Poor thing!’ said Bao-yu. ‘How she must have cried and cried during this past week or so!’ The thought of her crying made him knit his brows and sigh.

Now that Shiner was back, Xi-feng was all agog to question him about Jia Lian but could not do so in any detail in front of the others. She would have liked to follow him back home, but her duties were by no means over, and she was obliged to hold out until evening. Then, back in her own apartment, she summoned him to her and asked him for full particulars of the journey. She looked out all Jia Lian’s furs, and she and Patience sat up into

the night getting them ready and packing them -together with anything else which careful thought suggested might be needed—for Shiner to take back with him to his Master. Xi-feng gave Shiner minute instructions concerning his conduct towards the latter:

'Mind you look after your master properly away from home, now. Try not to make him angry. And do always be on at him not to drink too much. And don't encourage him to get mixed up with bad women. If, when you get back, I find out that you *have* done, I'll break your legs!'

Shiner laughingly agreed to abide by all her instructions. By the time they got to bed it was well past one in the morning. To Xi-feng it seemed as though she had barely lain down to sleep when it was dawn once more and time to get up again and wash and dress for another round of duties at Ning-guo House.

The day of the funeral was now approaching and Cousin Zhen took an expert in geomancy with him in his carriage and drove out to the Temple of the Iron Threshold to inspect the terrain and personally assist in the selection of a suitable resting-place for Qin-shi's coffin. He gave detailed instructions to the monk4n-charge, Father Sublimitas, for the provision of a completely new set of hangings and altar furnishings for the funeral, and for the engagement of as many fashionable monks as he could think of to participate in the ceremony of receiving the coffin.

Sublimitas hurriedly prepared a vegetarian supper for his visitors; but Cousin Zhen had little heart for eating, and, as it was by now too late to return to the city, presently retired to a bed that had been made up for him in the monk's quarters, leaving first thing next morning in order to press on with arrangements for the funeral. On his return he sent some workmen out to the temple to refurbish the place he had chosen for the coffin. They were instructed to work on the job throughout the night in order to make sure that it was finished in time. He also sent Out a number of kitchen staff to cater for the funeral party on its arrival.

Xi-feng, too, began to make her own careful preparations as the day of the funeral drew near. On the one hand she had to select coachmen and bearers from the Rong-guo staff for the carriages and sedans that Lady Wang and the other Rong-guo ladies would ride in in the procession. On the other hand, as she fully intended to take part in it herself, she had to find herself somewhere to stop at on the way as well as accommodation for the night after the funeral.

The Dowager-duchess of Shan-guo happened to die just about this time and Xi-feng had to make the arrangements for Lady Xing and Lady Wang when they paid their visits of condolence and later when they attended the funeral. She had to see about birthday presents for the Princess of Xi-an. She had to write to her parents and get things ready to send to them when her elder brother Wang Ren returned with his wife and children to the South. And when on top of all this Jia Lian's young sister Ying-chun fell ill and needed doctors' visits and medicines every day, it was Xi-feng who had to puzzle over the diagnostic reports, discuss the patient's symptoms with the learned physicians, and decide on the relative merits of rival prescriptions.

Indeed, so multifarious had her activities become that it would be impossible to list them all. As a consequence she was far too busy to pay much attention to eating and drinking and could hardly sit or lie down for a moment in peace. When she went to the Ning-guo mansion she was followed around all the time by people from the Rong-guo mansion, and when she Went back to Rong-guo House, members of the Ning-guo establishment would trail after her. Yet although she was so busy, a passion to succeed and a dread of being criticized enabled her to summon up reserves of energy, and she man-aged to plan everything with such exemplary thoroughness that every member of the clan was loud in her praises.

Wake night arrived—the night when no one in the family may go to bed—and Ning-guo House was crowded with friends and relations. Since You-shi was still confined to her room, it was left entirely to Xi-feng to

do the honours. There were, to be sure, a number of other young married women in the clan, but all were either tongue-tied or giddy, or they were so petrified by bashfulness or timidity that the presence of strangers or persons of higher rank threw them into a state of panic. Xi-feng's vivacious charm and social assurance stood out in striking contrast—'a touch of **scarlet** in a field of **green**'. She was in her element, and if she took any notice at all of her humbler sisters it was only to throw out an occasional order or to bend them in some other way to her imperious will.

Throughout the whole of that night the Ning-guo mansion was ablaze with lights. There was a constant bustle of guests being welcomed or seen off the premises and all the liveliness and excitement that is customary on occasions of this sort.

With the dawning of the day and the arrival of the hour deemed auspicious for its departure, sixty-four **green**-coated bearers arrived for the coffin, preceded by a great funeral banner bearing the following inscription:

Mortal Remains
of the
Much Lamented
LADY QIN-SHI
of the
House of Jia,
Senior Great-great-granddaughter-in-law
of the
Duke of Ning-guo,
Nobleman of the First Rank by Imperial Patent,
and Wife of the
Right Honourable Jia Rong,
Honorary Captain in the Imperial Bodyguard,
Inner Palace, Northern Capital Division.

The costumes, insignia, and funeral trappings were all glitteringly new, having been specially made for the occasion.

Jewel, acting in the capacity of unmarried daughter of the deceased, smashed a bowl on the floor at the foot of the coffin and as they bore it out walked in front with an impressive display of grief.

Among the distinguished guests taking part m the procession were:

Niu Ji-zong (earl, hereditary first rank), grandson of Niu Qing, Duke of Zhen-guo,
Liu Fang (viscount, hereditary first rank), grandson of Liu Biao, Duke of Li-guo,
Chen Rui-wen (Maj.-General), grandson of Chen Yi, Duke of Qi-guo,
Ma Shang-de (Maj.-General), grandson of Ma Kui, Duke of Zhi-guo,
Hou Xiao-kang (viscount, hereditary first rank), grandson of Hou Xiao-ming, Duke of Xiu-guo.

The grandfathers of the above, together with the Duke of Shan-guo, whose grandson Shi Guang-zhu was in mourning for the Dowager-duchess and unable to attend, and the Dukes of Rong-guo and Ning-guo, had formed the well-known group often referred to by their contemporaries as the 'Eight Dukes'.

The other mourners included:

The grandson of H. H. the Prince of Nan-an,
The grandson of H. H. the Prince of Xi-ning,

Shi Ding, Marquis of Zhong-jing, nephew of old Lady Jia,

Jiang Zi-ning (baron, hereditary second rank), grandson of the Marquis of Ping-yuan, Xie Kun (baron, hereditary second rank, and lieutenant-colonel, Metropolitan Barracks), grandson of the Marquis of Ding-cheng,

Qi Jian-hui (baron, hereditary second rank), grandson of the Marquis of Xiang-yang,

Qiu Liang (Chief Commissioner of Police, Metropolitan Area), grandson of the Marquis of Jing-tian.

Also present were the Marquis of Jin-xiang's son Han Qi, General Feng's son Feng Zi-ying, General Chen's son Chen Ye-jun, General Wei's son Wei Ruo-An, and a large number of other young gentlemen of distinguished parentage.

As for lady guests, there were ten or so large and thirty or forty small palanquins, which together with the palanquins and carriages of the Jia ladies brought the total number of equipages to at least a hundred and ten. These, with the in-numerable bearers of insignia and other funeral trappings up at the front, formed a procession altogether more than a mile long.

The procession had not advanced very far when it began to pass the decorated 'funeral bowers' and tables of offerings put up along the sides of the street by friends and well-wishers of the family. From some of them the strains of funeral music struck up as it approached.

The first of these bowers was the Princess of Dong-ping's, the second was the Prince of Nan-an's, the third was the Prince of Xi-ning's, and the fourth that of the Prince of Bei-jing.

Of the original holders of these four titles the Prince of Bei-jing had been highest in imperial favour by virtue of his great services to the Crown. As a consequence, the title and the style of 'prince' had been retained by his descendants. The present holder of the title, Shui Rong, was a youth still in his teens -a young man of great personal beauty and a modest and unaffected disposition. On receiving the announcement of the premature demise of the wife of one of the Duke of Ning-guo's descendants, Shui Rong was reminded of the friendship that had formerly existed between the Duke of Ning-guo and his own ancestor—both having fought in the same campaigns and shared hardships and triumphs together—and resolved to lay aside all considerations of rank in demonstrating his sympathy for the bereaved. Two days previously he had paid a visit of condolence and made inquiries about the funeral arrangements, and now, today, intending to make a libation to the coffin as it went by, he had had his booth constructed at the road side and had instructed a number of his staff to wait there in readiness for his arrival.

At four o'clock that morning the prince had had to be present at the imperial palace for the early levée; but, as soon as his business there was over, he changed out of court dress and into mourning and after getting into his great palanquin, was borne through the streets, preceded by gongs and umbrellas of state, to the place where his funeral bower had been erected. There his palanquin was set down and the gentlemen of his household ranged themselves on either side of it. The street was kept clear of traffic and pedestrians while he waited.

Presently the procession came in sight, advancing from the north end of the street like a great river, the hearse itself looking like some great silver mountain that crushed the earth beneath it as it moved. In a trice the forerunners had reported back to Cousin Zhen, who at once gave orders to the insignia bearers to halt, and hurrying forward with his Uncles Jia She and Jia Zheng, saluted the prince with full court etiquette. The prince received their prostrations with a gracious smile and a slight inclination of his person inside the palanquin, and when he spoke to them it was not as a prince to a subject, but using the form of address he employed when speaking to family friends.

'Your Highness, I am quite overwhelmed by the honour you do us in graciously condescending to be present

at the funeral of my daughter-in-law,' said Cousin Zhen.

'My dear friend,' said the Prince of Bei-jing, 'your excessive modesty does us both an injustice.'

Thereupon he turned to the chamberlain of his household and ordered him to make offerings on his behalf. Cousin Zhen and his uncles made the correct ritual responses while this official performed them, then returned to the palanquin and bowed their thanks to the prince. The prince received their thanks with a most becoming modesty and by way of conversation asked Jia Zheng a question about Bao-yu.

'Which is the boy who was born with a stone in his mouth? I have long looked forward to the pleasure of meeting him. I am sure he must be here today. Can you not bring him to see me?'

Jia Zheng at once withdrew to fetch Bao-yu. He made him first change into court dress before, leading him forward to meet the prince.

Bao-yu had often heard about the Prince of Bei-jing. He had heard that he was very clever. He had also heard that he was as handsome as he was clever and that he was a quite jolly, unconventional sort of person who refused to let either his royal birth or the conventions of official life constrain him. He had often wanted to meet him, but had been deterred by his father's strictness from doing so. And now here was the Prince of Bei-jing asking to see *him!* A feeling of pleasant anticipation filled him as he hurried forward with his father. He peeped up at the prince as they advanced and saw that he was, as report had painted him, an extremely good-looking young man.

But if you want to know about his interview with the handsome prince, you will have to read about it in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 15

At Water-moon Priory Xi-feng finds how much profit may
procured by the abuse of power
And Qin Zhong discovers the pleasures that are to
be had under the cover of darkness

Looking up, Bao-yu saw that Shui Rong's princely headgear was embellished by way of mourning with white bands, a white hatpin, and filigree silver 'wings'. As a further token of mourning his robe, though heavily bordered with a 'tooth and wave' design of rainbow-coloured stripes and gold-em-blazoned with the royal five-clawed dragon, was of a white material. It was confined at the waist by a **red** leather belt, studded with **green** jade. The splendid costume, the luminous eyes, the finely chiselled features really did make him an arrestingly handsome young man. Bao-yu started forward impulsively to make his salutation, but the prince extended an arm from the palanquin and prevented him from kneeling.

Bao-yu was wearing a little silver coronet on the top of his head and a silver headband round his brow in the form of two dragons emerging from the sea. He had on a narrow-sleeved, full-skirted robe of white material and a silver belt inlaid with pearls. After studying these and admiring the flowerlike face and coal-black eyes, the prince's face broke into a smile.

'If "Bao-yu" means "precious jade", you are appropriately named,' he said. 'But where is the famous stone you were born with?'

Bao-yu hurriedly extracted the jade from inside his clothing and taking it off, handed it to the prince, who scrutinized it carefully, reciting the words of the inscription as he deciphered them.

'And does it really have these powers?' he asked.

‘It is only alleged to,’ Jia Zheng put in hastily. ‘We have never put them to the test.’
The prince pronounced the stone a great wonder and with his own hands refastened its plaited silken cord round Bao-yu’s neck. Then, taking one of Bao-yu’s hands in his own, he asked him how old he was, what books he was studying, and other such questions, to all of which Bao-yu gave prompt replies.
Delighted that everything Bao-yu said was so clear and to the point, the prince observed to Jia Zheng that ‘the young phoenix was worthy of his sire.
‘I trust I shall not offend you by saying so to your face,’ he said, ‘but I venture to prophesy that this fledgling of yours will one day “sing sweeter than the parent bird”.’
Jia Zheng smiled politely.
‘My son is doubtless unworthy of the compliment Your Highness is good enough to pay him. If; thanks to your encouragement, he turns out as you say, we shall count ourselves truly fortunate.’
‘There is only one drawback in possessing such charm,’ said the prince. ‘I am sure it must make his grandmother dote upon him; and, unfortunately, being the object of too much affection is very bad for people of our years. It leads us to neglect our studies. This used at one time to be the case with me, and I suspect is now the case with your son. If he *does* find difficulty in working at home, he would be very welcome to come round to my palace. I do not pretend to be a gifted person myself; but I am fortunate in counting distinguished writers from all over the empire among my acquaintances, and my palace is a rendezvous for them when they are in the capital, so that I never want for intellectual company. By constantly mixing and conversing with such people at my palace, your son could do much to improve his education.’
‘Yes.’ Jia Zheng bowed deferentially.
The Prince of Bei-jing removed a rosary from his wrist and handed it to Bao-yu.
‘Today is our first meeting, but as it was an unforeseen one, I have not come prepared with a suitable gift. All I can offer you is this rosary made of the aromatic seeds of some Indian plant. It was given me by his Imperial Majesty. I hope you will accept it as a little token of my esteem.’
Bao-yu took the rosary and turning back offered it respectfully to Jia Zheng, who made his son loin him in formally thanking the prince for his gift.
At this point Jia She and Cousin Zhen knelt before the prince and invited him to return.
‘The Departed is now in paradise,’ said the prince. ‘Though I enjoy imperial favour and princely rank, I would not presume to go past her carriage~ Heavenly honours take precedence over earthly ones!’
When they saw that the prince was adamant, Jia She and the test bowed their thanks, then, having ordered the musicians to vail their instruments and march by in silence, they caused the front part of the procession and the hearse to pass over the junction. As soon as the hearse had gone over, the prince and his retinue crossed in the other direction, after which the rear part of the procession moved forward and caught up with the rest.

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The liveliness which attended the procession during the whole of its progress through the city reached a climax as it approached the city gate, for it was along this last stretch that the colleagues and office juniors of Jia She, Jia Zheng and Cousin Zhen had arranged their bowers, and it was necessary to stop and thank each one of them as they made their offerings to the passing hearse. They did at last succeed in getting out of the city gate, however, after which a clear road lay ahead all the way to the Temple of the Iron Threshold. Cousin Zhen went round with Jia Rong to the senior men among the mourners and invited them to proceed from there onwards by the transport provided. The upshot was that those of Jia She’s generation got into carriages and sedans, while Cousin Zhen and the younger men mounted on horseback.

Xi-feng was worried about Bao-yu. Out in the country, she thought, he was liable to become wild and disobedient. She felt sure that he would get up to some kind of mischief now that he was removed from Jia Zheng'.s restraint. Accordingly she sent one of her pages to summon him, and presently he rode up to her carriage.

'Bao dear,' said Xi-feng, 'a person of your refinement belongs here with us. You don't want to go clomping around the countryside like apes on horseback with those horrid men! Why not get in with me? The two of us will keep each other company.'

Bao-yu at once dismounted and climbed up into the carriage, and the two of them drove on, laughing and chattering as they went. They had not been driving very long when two horsemen galloped up beside them, dismounted, and leaning into the carriage, informed Xi-feng that they were now near her stopping-place, in case she wished to get Out and 'stretch her legs'. Xi-feng sent them on ahead to ask Lady Xing and Lady Wang for instructions. The latter sent back word that they had no desire to stop, themselves, but that Xi-feng was welcome to do so if she wished. Xi-feng accordingly gave orders for a short halt. At once the pages led the horses out of the main stream of traffic and headed northwards down a small side-road.

Bao-yu hurriedly sent someone off to fetching Zhong, who was riding along behind his father's sedan. As the page came hurrying up and asked him to stop with Bao-yu for a little refreshment, he turned round and saw Bao-yu's horse in the distance, jogging along in a northerly direction with an empty saddle on its back behind Xi-feng's carriage, and he realized that Bao-yu must be inside the carriage with Xi-feng. Turning lils horse's head about, he hurried after, and followed them into the gateway of a farm.

Apart from the barns and outhouses, the farmhouse consisted of little more than a single large room, so that there was nowhere the farmer's womenfolk could go to be Out of the way of the visitors. The sudden appearance in their midst of Xi-feng, Bao-yu and Qin Zhong with their fashionable clothes and delicate city faces seemed to these simple countrywomen more like a celestial visitation than a human one.

As soon as they were inside the thatched central building, Xi-feng asked the boys to amuse themselves outside. Bao-yu realized that she needed to be alone, and conducted Qin Zhong and the pages on a tour of the farmyard. He had never in his life seen any of the farming implements before, and was very curious. One of his pages who had some experience of country matters was able to name each implement for him and explain its functions. Bao-yu was impressed.

'Now I can understand the words of the old poet,' he said:

'Each grain of rice we ever ate
Cost someone else a drop of sweat.'

At that moment they came to an outhouse in which was a kang with a spinning-wheel on it. Bao-yu was even more intrigued.

'That's for spinning yarn with to make cloth out of,' said the pages.

Bao-yu at once got up on the kang and had just started to turn It when a country lass of seventeen or eighteen summers came running up:

'Don't! You'll spoil ir!'

She was shouted at fiercely by the pages, but Bao-yu had already stayed his hand.

'I'm sorry. I've never seen one before. I was just turning it for fun, to see how it works.'

'You don't know how to turn it properly,' said the girl. [1]Let me show you how 'tis done.'

Qin Zhong gave Bao-yu a sly tug:

'A comely damosel, thinkest thou nottest?'

'Shut up, or I'll clout you!' said Bao-yu, pushing him.

During this muttered exchange the girl had begun spinning. She did, indeed, make a charming picture as she bent over her work. Suddenly an old woman's voice called out from the other side of the yard:

‘Ertie! Come here at once my gal.’

The girl jumped up from her spinning and hurried over. Bao-yu’s spirits were quite dashed by her abrupt departure.

But just then someone came from Xi-feng inviting the boys indoors. They found her washed and changed. She asked them if they wanted to ‘change’ too, but Bao-yu replied that they did not. Then a variety of cakes and sweets were brought in by the servants, and fragrant tea was poured for them to drink. When the three had taken their fill of these refreshments and everything had been cleared away and repacked by the servants, they rose up and got back into their carriage.

Outside in the yard Brightie handed the farmer’s family their payment, which he had brought with him ready-wrapped in coloured paper, and the womenfolk hurried up to the carriage to express their thanks. Bao-yu scanned their faces carefully, but could not see his spinning-girl amongst them. They had not driven far, however, when he caught sight of her at the end of the village. She was standing watching for him beside the road, a baby brother in her arms and two little girls at her Bide. Bao-yu could not repress a strong emotion on seeing her, but sitting there in the carriage there was not much he could do but gaze back at her soulfully; and soon, as the carriage bowled along at a smarter pace, Ertie was lost to sight for ever.

With talk and laughter to beguile them, the journey passed quickly. Soon they had caught up with the main procession; soon the sound of drums and cymbals was heard and they could see ahead of them the banners and umbrellas of the monks from the Temple of the Iron Threshold who had come out in procession and lined either side of the road to welcome them; and soon they were inside the temple, where further ceremonies awaited them, a new staging having been erected for this purpose. The coffin was installed in one of the side-chapels leading off the inner hall, and Jewel arranged her sleeping-quarters near by to continue her watch over it.

In the outer hall Cousin Zhen was busy attending to his guests, some of whom were staying on, while others wished to leave immediately. To each he tendered formal thanks for their trouble in coming. They left in order of seniority; duke’s kin going first, then those of marquises, then those of earls, then those of viscounts, then those of barons, and so on downwards. It was three o’clock by the time the last of them had gone.

Xi-feng received the lady guests inside. They, too, left in order of precedence and had not finally dispersed until around two o’clock. Only members of the clan and a few very close friends stayed behind to see the ceremonies through to their conclusion two days later.

Lady Xing and Lady Wang were among those who left. They could see that Xi-feng would be unable to return that day and wanted to take Bao-yu back with them into town. But Bao-yu, after his first taste of the countryside, was extremely loth to return and begged to stay with Xi-feng; so Lady Wang went without him, leaving him in Xi-feng’s charge.

The Temple of the Iron Threshold was a private foundation of the Dukes of Ning-guo and Rong-guo which still had some land of its own in which members of the clan who died in the capital could be given temporary burial. The thoughtful Dukes had provided accommodation not only for the dead but also for the living, in the form of guest-rooms in which mourners might temporarily reside until their funereal business was over What the old gentlemen had not foreseen was that their multitudinous progeny would come in time to exhibit differences of wealth and temperament so extreme as often to render their possessors mutually intolerable and that, whereas the more hard-up members of the clan gladly occupied the accommodation provided, the more affluent or pretentious found it ‘inconvenient’ to stay there and preferred to seek alternative accommodation in the farmsteads and con-vents round about.

Xi-feng was among those who found the Iron Threshold accommodation ‘inconvenient’. Some time previously she had sent someone to Wheat-cake Priory to make arrangements on her behalf with the prioress Euergesia, and the old nun had turned out several rooms in readiness for her arrival. ‘Wheat-cake Priory’ (so-called because of the excellent steamed wheat bread made in its kitchens) was the popular name for Water-moon Priory, an offshoot of Water-moon Abbey situated at no great distance from the Temple of the Iron Threshold.

Presently, when the monks had finished their service and the evening offering of tea had been made, Cousin Zhen sent Jia Rong in to Xi-feng with a message inviting her to retire. Having first glanced round to ascertain that a sufficient number of Jia ladies were present to look after the still remaining guests, Xi-feng bade the company good night and left for Wheat-cake Priory with Bao-yu and Qin Zhong. Qin Zhong had attached himself to the other two when his father Qin Bang-ye, unable by reason of his age and frail state of health to risk a night away from home, had gone back to the city, leaving him to await the conclusion of the requiem services on his own.

They soon arrived at the priory and were met by Euergesia, who had brought her two little disciples Benevolentia and Sapientia to welcome them. As soon as the first greetings were over, Xi-feng retired to her room to wash and change. Emerging refreshed, she observed how much taller Sapientia had grown and how radiantly good-ooking, and inquired of Euergesia why she and her two charges had lately not been into town to see them.

'It is on account of Mr. Hu's good lady,' said the old nun. 'She has lately been brought to bed of a boy, and sent us ten taels of silver for a three-day recital of the *Lake of Blood* sutra by some of the sisters to purge the stain of childbirth. We have been so busy with the arrangements that we haven't had time to call.'

Let us leave Xi-feng in conversation with the prioress and turn to the other two.

Qin Zhong and Bao-yu were amusing themselves in the main hall of the priory when Sapientia happened to pass through.

'Here's Sappy,' said Bao-yu with a meaningful smile.

'Well, what about it?' said Qin Zhong.

'Now, now, stop play-acting!' said Bao-yu. '*I* saw you holding her that day at Grandma's when you thought nobody else was about. You needn't think you can fool me after *that!*'

'I don't know what you're talking about.'

'All right then. Never mind whether you know what I'm talking about or not. Just ask her to pour me out a cup of tea, will you, and then we'll let the subject drop.'

'What sort of joke is this? Why can't you ask her yourself? She'd pour it out just the same for you. Why ask *me* to tell her?'

'I couldn't do it with the same feeling as you. There'll be much more feeling in it if you ask her.'

He finally prevailed upon Qin Zhong to make the request.

'Oh, all right! - Sappy, pour us a cup of tea, will you?'

Sapientia had been a regular visitor at the Rong-guo mansion ever since she was a little girl and was familiar with all its inmates. The innocence of her childish rompings with Bao-yu and Qin Zhong had latterly, however—now that she had reached adolescence—given way to a more mature emotion. She had fallen in love with Qin Zhong, whose every feature and lineament now inspired her with romantic feelings; and Qin Zhong, captivated by her developing charms, had responded by loving her back. Although nothing serious had as yet passed between them, in their inclinations and affections they were already united.

Sapientia hurried out and returned with a cup of tea.

'Give it to me, Sappy!' said Qin Zhong.

'No, give it to me, Sappy I' said Bao-yu.

She stood between them, pouting prettily, and gave a little laugh:

'Surely you're not going to fight over a cup of tea? I must have honey on my hands I'

Bao-yu snatched the cup before Qin Zhong could do so and began drinking. He was about to say something when Benevolentia came in and fetched Sapientia away to help her lay the table. She was back again presently to invite the two boys to tea and cakes; but neither of them felt much enthusiasm for such feminine repasts, and after sitting a short while for the sake of politeness, were soon off to amuse themselves elsewhere.

Xi-feng, too, soon left, and retired to her private room to rest, Euergesia accompanying her. By this time the older servants, seeing that there was nothing further for them to do, had one by one drifted off to bed, leaving only a few personal maids, all of whom were in Xi-feng's confidence, in attendance. The old nun deemed it safe to

broach a private matter in their hearing.
‘There is something I have been meaning to call at your house and ask Her Ladyship about, but I should like to have your opinion on it first before I see her.’
‘What do you want to ask her?’ said Xi-feng.
‘Bless his Holy Name!’ the prioress began piously. ‘When I was a nun at the Treasures in Heaven Convent in Chang-an, one of the convent’s benefactors was a very wealthy man called Zhang, who had a daughter called Jin-ge. A certain young Mr. Li, who is brother-in-law to the Governor of Chang-an, met her once when she was making an incense offering in our temple and took a violent liking to her. He at once sent someone to the parents to ask for her hand in marriage, but unfortunately she was already betrothed to the son of a captain in the Chang-an garrison and the betrothal-presents had already been accepted. The Zhangs would have liked to cancel the betrothal but were afraid that the captain would object, so they told. Li’s matchmaker that the girl was already engaged. But oh dear! young Mr. Li wouldn’t take no for an answer, and the Zhangs were quite at their wit’s end, being now in trouble with both parties. You see, when the captain got to hear of these goings-on he was most unreasonable. He came rushing along in a great rage and made a most terrible scene. ‘Just how many young men is this girl betrothed to?” he said, and so on and so forth. He refused outfight to take back the betrothal-gifts and straightway began an action for breach of promise. By now the Zhangs were really upset and sent to the capital for some moral support - for they are now quite determined to break off their daughter’s engagement, seeing that the captain has been so unreasonable.
‘Well, it occurred to me that the Area Commander for Chang-an, General Yun, is on very good terms with your husband’s family, and I thought I might try to find some way of persuading Her Ladyship to talk to Sir Zheng about this and get him to write a letter to General Yun and ask him to have a word with this captain. It is hardly likely that he would refuse to obey his commanding officer. The Zhangs would gladly pay *anything*—even if it meant bankrupting themselves -in return for this kindness.’
Xi-feng laughed.
‘It doesn’t sound very difficult. The only difficulty is that Lady Wang doesn’t touch this kind of thing any more.’
‘If Her Ladyship won’t, what about you, Mrs Lian?’
Xi-feng laughed again.
‘I’m not short of money; and besides, I don’t touch that Sort of thing either.’
Euergesia’s face assumed an expression of great benignity. After sitting for a while in silence she sighed.
‘It’s a pity I let the Zhangs know that I was going to talk to you about this,’ she said. *‘Now* if you don’t do this favour for them, they will never believe that it is because you haven’t the time or don’t want the money; they will take it as a sign that you are not able.’
This put Xi-feng on her mettle.
‘You’ve known me a long time,’ she said. ‘You know that I’ve never believed all that talk about hell and damnation. If I decide that I want to do something I do it, no matter what it is. Tell them that if they are prepared to pay out three thousand taels of silver, I will undertake to relieve them of their trouble.’
The prioress was delighted.
‘They will! They will I No doubt about it!’
‘Mind you,’ said Xi-feng, ‘I’m not one of your money-grubbing run-of4he-miii go-betweens. I’m not doing this for the money. Every bit of this three thousand taels will go into the pockets of my boys or towards their expenses. *I* shan’t touch a penny of it. If it was money I wanted, I could lay my hands on *thirty* thousand taels at this very moment.’
‘Well, that’s nicely settled!’ said the prioress. ‘So can we lo6k forward to your kind help in this matter tomorrow? We may as well get it over and done with.’
‘You can see how busy I am and how impossible it is for me to get away,’ said Xi-feng. ‘I’ve told you I’ll do it, and so I will - in my own time. Surely that is enough for you?’

‘A little thing like this might seem a great deal of trouble to some people;’ said the old nun artfully, ‘but even if it involved more than it does, it would still be nothing to a capable person like you, Mrs Lian. You know what they say: “The able man gets little leisure” that’s why Her Ladyship leaves everything to you. She knows how capable you are. Of course, you have to be careful that you don’t overtax yourself. Your health is precious!’

Soothed by such flatteries, Xi-feng forgot her weariness, and the conversation continued with animation.

Meanwhile Qin Zhong had taken advantage of the darkness and the fact that there was no one much about to prosecute his designs on Sapientia. He found her on her own in one of the rooms at the back of the priory washing up tea-things. Throwing his arms around her from behind, he gave her a kiss. Sapientia stamped with vexation:

‘What are you doing? Stop it!’

She was about to call out, but Qin Zhong spoke entreatingly:

‘Darling Sappy! I want you so desperately! If you won’t let me, I’ll just lie down and die!’

‘If you want me,’ said Sapientia, ‘you must first get me out of this hole and away from these people. Then you can do what you like.’

‘That’s easy,’ said Qin Zhong. ‘But “distant water is no cure for a present thirst” ...’

And with that he blew out the light, plunging the room into inky darkness, and carried Sapientia on to the kang. She struggled hard to get up—though still not daring to call out; but soon, almost before she knew it, her breech-clout was off and the ship was in the harbour.

Suddenly, in less time than it takes to tell, a third person bore down on them from above and held them fast. The intruder made no sound, and for some moments the other two lay underneath his weight, half dead with fright. Then there was a splutter of suppressed laughter and they knew that it was Bao-yu.

‘What do you think you’re playing at?’ said Qin Zhong crossly, as he scrambled to his feet.

‘If you won’t let me, darling,’ Bao-yu mimicked, ‘I’ll call Out!’

Poor Sapientia was so overcome with shame that she slipped away in the dark. Bao-yu hauled Qin Zhong from the room.

‘Now,’ he said: ‘are you *still* going to pretend that Sappy means nothing to you?’

‘Look, be a good chap! I’ll do anything you say as long as you promise not to shout.’

‘We won’t say any more about it just now,’ said Bao-yu genially. ‘Wait until we are both in bed and I’ll settle accounts with you then.’

Bedtime soon came and they partially undressed and settled down for the night, Xi-feng in an inner room and Bao-yu and Qin Zhong in an outer room adjoining it. As there were numerous old women on night duty lying about everywhere on the floor wrapped up in their bedding, Xi-feng was afraid that the ‘Magic Jade’ might disappear in the course of the night; so as soon as Bao-yu was in bed she sent someone to fetch it from him, and put it under her own pillow for safety.

As for the ‘settling of accounts’ that Bao-yu had proposed to Qin Zhong, we have been unable to ascertain exactly what form this took; and as we would not for the world be guilty of a fabrication, we must allow the matter to remain a mystery.

Next day someone arrived from Grandmother Jia and Lady Wang to see how Bao-yu was getting on. He was counselled to dress up well against the cold and to come back home if there was nothing further to do. Bao-yu was most unwilling to return on his own account, and his unwillingness was reinforced by the promptings of Qin Zhong, who was anxious to see more of Sapientia and urged him to ask Xi-feng for another day.

Xi-feng reflected a little. The main business of the funeral was now over, but a sufficient number of minor matters still remained to be done to justify their staying on another day if they wanted to. Three arguments in favour of staying presented themselves to her mind:

1. It would be a gesture of considerateness to Cousin Zhen which would increase his indebtedness to her.
2. It would give her a breathing-space in which to get Euergesia’s business attended to.

3.It would make Bao-yu happy, which would put her in good odour with Grandmother Jia.

Having now made her mind up, Xi-feng acceded to Bao-yu's request in the following terms:

'My own business here is all finished now, but if you want to amuse yourselves a bit longer, I suppose I must resign myself to staying. However, we definitely *must* go back tomorrow.'

When Bao-yu heard this it was all 'dearest Feng' this and 'darling Feng' that, and he promised faithfully to return on the morrow without demur. Accordingly it was settled that they should stay for one more night.

Xi-feng immediately sent someone in great secrecy to explain Euergesia's business to Brightie. Brightie grasped the situation at once, hurried into town, sought out a public letter-writer, had a letter written in Jia Lian's name to the captain's commanding officer, and set off for Chang-an overnight bearing the spurious missive with him.

Chang-an is only thirty or 50 miles from the capital, so that Brightie could finish his business and be back again within a couple of days. The general's name was Yun Guang. He was indebted to the Jia family for a number of past kindnesses and was only too 'pleased to be of service to them in a matter of such trifling importance. He said as much in the letter of reply which he gave Brightie to carry back with him. But that part of his mission is omitted from our story.

When their second day at the priory was over, Xi-feng and the boys took leave of Euergesia, and as she said good-bye, Xi-feng told the prioress to call at the Rong-guo mansion m two days' time to hear the news from Chang-an.

This parting was an unbearably painful one for Sapientia and Qin Zhong, and all sorts of secret vows were exchanged and whispered contracts made before they could tear themselves apart. We omit all details of that harrowing scene.

Xi-feng called in at the Temple of the Iron Threshold on the way back to see that everything was in order. jewel, it seemed, refused absolutely to go back home, and Cousin Zhen was obliged to leave a woman or two at the temple to keep her company.

Their return, and the events which followed it, will be dealt with in the following chapter.

CHAPTER 16

Jia Yuan-chun is selected for g1orious promotion
to the Imperial Bedchamber
And Qin Zhong is summoned for premature departure
on the journey into Night

Xi-feng, Qin Zhong and Bao-yu, as we have said, called in at the Temple of the Iron Threshold on their way home. After looking round for a while, the three of them got back into their carriage and continued their journey into the city. Rome once more, they first called on Grandmother Jia and Lady Wang and then Went off to their several rooms. But of the rest of that day and the night which followed, our story says nothing.

Next morning Bao-yu found that his outer study had now been finished and was ready for use. He looked forward to beginning night-work in it with Qin Zhong, in. accordance with a promise they had made each other. But unfortunately Qin Zhong's always sickly constitution had been much neglected during their two-day excursion into the country, and the unwonted exposure to wind and cold and immoderate indulgence in secret frolic with Sapientia had resulted on his return in a cough and chill accompanied by total loss of appetite. Altogether he presented so sorry a spectacle that study was quite out of the question and they were obliged to send him back home to bed. Although Bao-yu was very disappointed, there was nothing at all he could do but wait for his friend to get better.

Xi-feng had now received Yun Guang's reply to the bogus letter, expressing his readiness to comply with her

(or, as he supposed, Jia Lian's) request. Euergesia communicated this information to the Zhangs; and soon the captain, swallowing his anger and resentment as best he could, was obliged to receive back the betrothal gifts he had sent them on behalf of his son. But Jin-ge possessed a far nobler spirit than might have been expected in the daughter of such mercenary parents. On learning that her affianced had been sent packing, she quietly went off and hanged herself in her scarf. The captain's son, too, turned out to be a young person of unexpectedly romantic notions, for on hearing that Jin-ge had hanged herself, he promptly threw himself into a river and was drowned. The Zhangs and the Lis were thus left in a very unenviable
Situation:

'the maid and eke the money gone'

in the words of the poet. The only gainer was Xi-feng, who now had three thousand taels of silver to sit back and enjoy at her leisure. Not an inkling of this affair reached the ears of Lady Wang.

Emboldened by this taste of success, Xi-feng from now on undertook many more ventures ofa similar nature - far more than we could give an account of in this history.

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The day of Jia Zheng's birthday arrived and all the members of the Ning-guo and Rong-guo households were gathered together to celebrate it. just as the festivities were at their height, one of the janitors from the main gate burst in on the assembled company:

'The Master of the imperial Bedchamber Mr Xia is on his way, sir, with an announcement from His Majesty the Emperor!'

Jia She, Jia Zheng and the rest were taken completely by surprise, quite unable to guess what the meaning of this visitation could be. Hurriedly giving orders for the players to halt their performance and for all traces of the feast to he cleared away, they caused a table with burning incense (which would be required for the reading of the Proclamation, if there was one) to beset down in its place. Then, throwing open the centre of the three main gates, they knelt down in the entrance of the mansion to receive their visitor.

Soon Xia Bing-zhong, the Eunuch Master of the Bed-chamber, arrived on horseback with a retinue of eunuchs at his back. He appeared to have no Imperial Proclamation or other document on his person, for instead of dismounting, as etiquette prescribed that he should if he was carrying a Written Instrument, he rode straight on to the foot of the main hall. There, with beaming countenance, he got down from his horse, climbed the steps, faced south and gave utterance to the following announcement:

'By order of His Imperial Majesty:
Jia Zheng is commanded to present himself at court immediately for private audience with His Imperial Majesty in the Hall of Reverence.'

Having delivered this message he got straight back on to his horse without staying for so much as a cup of tea and rode away. Still no wiser, Jia Zheng hurried into his court dress and hastened to the Palace, leaving Grandmother Jia and the rest in an extreme state of alarm which they endeavoured (un successfully) to allay by dispatching a regular stream of mounted couriers post-haste to the Palace to inquire for news.

About four hours later Lai Da, the Chief Steward of the Rong-guo mansion, and three or four other stewards came panting into the inner gate and gasped out congratulations.

'Master's orders,' said Lai Da between breaths: 'will Her Old Ladyship please bring Their Ladyships to the Palace to give thanks to His Majesty for the great favour he has shown us!'

Unable in her agitated state to remain indoors, Grandmother Jia had been waiting outside in the loggia, whither the others -Lady Xing, Lady Wang, You-shi, Li Wan, Xi-feng, Aunt Xue and the girls - had also

congregated to await news of Jia Zheng. Grandmother Jia called Lai Da inside to explain his cryptic message in somewhat greater detail.

'We servants were all waiting in an anteroom,' Lai Da told her, 'and we had no idea what was going on inside. Eventually Mr Xia came out and saw us waiting there. "Congratulations!" he said. "Your eldest young lady has been appointed Chief Secretary to the Empress and is to become an Imperial Concubine." Then after that Master came out, too, and told us the same thing. "I have to go off to the East Palace now," he said, "to see the Prince. But you must hasten back as quick as you can and tell Their Ladyships to come to the Palace and give thanks."'

Lai's Da information at once dispelled the anxiety that Grandmother Jia and the others had all this time been feeling, and the worried looks on their faces quickly gave way to smiles of pleasure. Now a great dressing-up began as each lady robed herself in the costume appropriate to her rank. Then off they went to the Palace in four sedans one behind the other: Grandmother Jia's at the head, then Lady Xing's, then Lady Wang's, and then You-shi's. Jia She and Cousin Zhen also changed into court dress, and taking Jia Rong and Jia Qiang with them, accompanied Grandmother Jia to the Palace as her male escort.

There was one person who did not share the unbounded delight now general among the members of the Ning-guo and Rong-guo households—who behaved, indeed, almost as if he had not heard the news at all. This person was Bao-yu. What was the reason for his unsociable lack of enthusiasm on this Occasion?

A short time previously the little nun Sapientia had absconded from Water-moon Priory and made her way into the city to look for Qin Zhong. Qin Bang-ye had discovered her, driven her from the house, and given Qin Zhong a beating. The shock and anger of the discovery had brought on an attack of the illness from which the old gentleman was a chronic sufferer, and within only four or five days he had breathed his last. Qin Zhong had always been of a weak and nervous disposition and had still not fully recovered from his sickness when these events occurred. The severe beating followed by the overwhelming grief and remorse attendant on the death of his father from anger which he had himself provoked led to serious complications in his illness.

This, then, was the reason for Bao-yu's unseasonable melancholy—a melancholy which the news of his sister Yuan-chun's dazzling promotion was powerless to dispel. Grandmother Jia's visit to the Palace to give thanks, her return home, the visits of friends and relations to congratulate the family, the unwontedly cheerful bustle of the Ning and Rong households during the days that followed, the general satisfaction that everyone in those households now seemed to feel—as far as Bao-yu was concerned these things might just as well not have been: he viewed them with the eyes of an outsider. The rest of the family merely laughed at him, seeing in this be-haviour only further confirmation of their belief that he was 'a bit touched'.

But then there was Jia Lian's and Dai-yu's homecoming to look forward to. The advent of the messenger Sent on ahead to announce that they would be arriving next day produced the first glimmer of cheerfulness that Bao-yu had so far shown. On being questioned for further details the messenger told them that Jia Yu-cun was also returning to the capital to have an audience with the Emperor. This was the doing of Wang Zi-teng, who had recommended him in a report to the throne for promotion to a metropdlitan post. As he was both a cousin (albeit a remote one) of. Jia Lian and also Dai-yu's former teacher, it had been resolved that he should travel with them. Lin Ru-hai having been laid with his ancestors in the family burying-ground and his obsequies duly concluded, they would, if they had proceeded to the capital by the usual stages, have been arriving back some time in the following month; but when Jia Lian heard the news about Yuan-chun's elevation, they bad decided to make greater speed, travelling by night as well as by day. The journey had been smooth and uneventful.

Bao-yu merely asked if Dai-yu was all right, and on being assured that she was, paid no further attention to the man's news.

Having waited with great impatience until the early after-noon of the following day, Bao-yu and the rest were rewarded with the announcement 'Mr Lian and Miss Lin have just arrived!' The joy of their reunion was, however, tempered with grief, because of the two deaths that had occurred since their parting, and for a while

there was much loud weeping on either side. Then there were words of comfort and congratulation to exchange and Bao-yu had an opportunity of studying Dai-yu more carefully. He recognized the same ethereal quality he had a]ways known in her, but it seemed to have deepened and intensified during her absence.

She had brought a lot of books back with her and was soon busy superintending the sweeping Out of her bedroom to accommodate them and arranging various *objets d'art* around it which had also formed part of her luggage. She had salvaged some paper, writing-brushes and other articles of stationery from her o1d home which she distributed as presents to Bao-chai, Ying-chun, Bao-yu and the rest. Bao-yu for his part hunted up the rosary of fragrant Indian beads given him by the Prince of Bei-jing and offered it as a gift to Dai-yu; but she flung it back at him disdainfully:

'What, carry a thing that some coarse *man* has pawed over? *I* don't want it!'

So Bao-yu was compelled to take it back again.

But let us now turn to Jia Lian.

When he had finished seeing everyone in the family, Jia Lian returned at last to his own apartment. Xi-feng, though still so busy that she had not a moment's leisure, had somehow contrived to find time to welcome back her wandering lord.

'Congratulations, Imperial Kinsman!' she said with a smile when, except for the servants, they were at last alone together. 'You have had a tiring journey, Imperial Kinsman. Yesterday when the courier gave notice of your arrival, I prepared a humble entertainment to celebrate your homecoming. Will the Imperial Kinsman graciously condescend to take a cup of wine with his handmaid?'

Jia Lian replied in the same vein:

'Madam, you are too kind! I am your most *oble-e-eged* and humble servant, ma'am I'

As they joked together, Patience and the other maids came forward to welcome their Master back, after which they served them both with tea. Jia Lian asked Xi-feng about the events that had occurred during his absence and thanked her for looking after things so well while he was away.

'I am not much of a manager really,' said Xi-feng. 'I haven't got the knowledge, and I'm too poor at expressing myself and too simple-minded - always inclined to "take a ramrod for a needle", as they say. Besides, I'm to6 soft-hearted for the job. Anyone who says a few kind words can get the better of me. And my lack of experience makes me so nervous. Aunt Wang only had to be the slightest bit displeased and I would get so upset that I couldn't sleep at night. I begged her not to make me do all these things, but she insisted. She said I only refused out of laziness and unwillingness to learn. I don't think she realizes even now the state I have been in—too seated to move or even to open my mouth for fear of saying or doing some-thing wrong. And you know what a difficult lot those old stewardesses are. The tiniest mistake and they are all laughing at you and making fun; the tiniest hint of favouritism and they are grumbling and complaining. *You* know their way of "cursing the oak-tree when they mean the ash". Those old women know just how to sit on the mountain-top and watch the tigers fight; how to murder with a borrowed knife, or help the wind to fan the fire. They will look on safely from the bank while you are drowning in the river. And the fallen oil-bottle can drain away: *they* are not going to pick it up. On top of that, as I am so young, I haven't got much authority over them; so it was all I could do to prevent them from ignoring me altogether. And to crown it all, when Rong's wife died Cousin Zhen kept coming round to see Aunt Wang and begging her on his knees to let me help out for a day or two next door. I said again and again that I couldn't do it; but Aunt Wang agreed just to please him, so there was nothing for it but to do as I was told. I'm afraid I made a terrible mess of it—even worse than I did here. And now it seems Cousin Zhen is beginning to grumble and says he wishes he had never asked me. When you see him tomorrow, do please try to make it up with him. Tell him it's because I'm young and inexperienced. You might even hint that it's his own fault for having asked me in the first place!'

While she was saying this there was a sound of talking in the next room.

'Who is it?' said Xi-feng.

Patience came in to reply.

'Mrs. Xue sent Caltrop over to ask me about something. I've already given her an answer and sent her back.'

'Ah yes!' said Jia Lian, apparently pleased by the recollection. 'When I went to call on Aunt Xue just now to tell her I was back, I tan into such a pretty young woman! I couldn't place her as any of the girls in our household, so in the course of conversation I asked Aunt Xue who she was. It seems that she's the little maid they had that lawsuit about. Cal—something. Caltrop. She's finally been given as "chamber-wife" to that idiot Xue, Now that she has been plucked and painted like a grown-up woman she really does look most attractive! What a waste to throw away a beautiful girl on that great booby!'

Xi-feng made a little moue.

'I should have thought that having just got back from Hangchow and Soochow and seen something of the world, you would have settled down a bit; but I see you are still the same greedy-guts as ever. Well, if you want her, there's nothing simpler: I'll exchange our Patience for her. You know what Cousin Xue is like: always "one eye on the dish and the other on the saucepan". Throughout the whole of this last year there have been I don't know how many alarms and excursions between him and poor Aunt Xue because she wouldn't let him get his hands on Caltrop. It wasn't just her looks that made her concerned for the girl. Everything about her is so unusual. She is so gentle and so quiet. Even among our own young ladies there is scarcely her equal. In the end Aunt Xue decided that if she couldn't stop him having her, at least she could make sure that the thing was done properly, with a party and invitations and all the rest of it. So that's what she did, and made her his chamber wife. But would you believe it, before a fortnight had gone by he had completely lost interest . .!"

She was interrupted by an announcement from one of the pages on the inner gate:

'Mr Zhen wants you, sir. He's waiting for you in the larger study.'

At once jia Lian did up his gown and hurried out.

'What on earth did Mrs. Xue want, sending Caltrop here like that?' Xi-feng asked Patience as soon as he had gone.

'It wasn't Caltrop!' said Patience. 'I had to make *something* up and hers was the first name that came to mind. That wife of Brightie's is such a stupid woman! Just imagine'—she drew closer to Xi-feng's ear and lowered her voice—'of all the times she could have chosen to bring you the interest on that money, she had to pick on the very moment when the Master has just got home! It's lucky I was in the outside room when she came, otherwise she might have come blundering in here and Master would have heard her message. And we all know what Master is like where money is concerned: he'd spend the fat in the frying-pan if he could get it Out! Once he found out that you had savings, he'd pluck up courage to spend them in no time. Anyway, I took the money from her quickly and gave her a piece of my mind - which I am afraid you must have heard. That's why I had to say what I did. I'd never have mentioned Caltrop in the Master's presence otherwise!'

Xi-feng laughed.

'I was going to say! Why, for no apparent reason, should Mrs. Xue choose a chamber-wife to send here the moment

Master gets back? So it was you up to your tricks, you little monkey!'

At this point Jia Lian came in again and Xi-feng ordered her maids to serve the wine and various choice dishes to go with it. Husband and wife sat cross-legged at opposite sides of the low table on the kang and began their drinking—Xi-feng with some restraint, although she was normally a fairly hard drinker, in view of the occasion.

They had not been drinking long when Jia Lian's old wet-nurse, Nannie Zhao, walked in. The young couple at once invited her to drink with them and tried to make her join them on the kang. This last honour she would under no circumstances accept, and Patience and the girls laid a little table for her at the side of the kang and set a little stool beside it, on which she sat down very contentedly. Jia Lian made a selection with his chopsticks from the dishes on the table, and after heaping up two platefuls, set them down on Nannie Zhao's own little table for her to eat there by herself. Xi-feng was critical:

'Nannie can't chew stuff like that. She'll break her teeth on it!' She turned to Patience. 'That piece of boiled gammon in the bowl I said this morning was so tender: that would be just the thing for Nannie. Why don't you run round to the kitchen and ask them to heat it up for her?— Nannie,' she said, addressing the old woman, 'you. must try some of the rice wine your Lian brought back with him from the South!'

'Oh yes!' said Nannie Zhao, 'I must try some of that! And you must have some too, Mrs. Lian. Never fear! As long as you don't drink too much, 'twill do you good. But I didn't come all the way here for vittles and drink, bless you. I came on more serious business. And you heed my words, Mrs. Lian, and stick up for me; because that Master Lian of yours he always *says* he'll do something, but when you go to see him later, he's clean forgot all about it! To think I reared you up on the milk of my own bosom, Master Lian! And a fine young man you've growed into, thanks be! Well, I'm old and of no account now. But there are these two sons of mine, d'ye see? If only you would be more like a foster-brother to theta and look after them a bit, no one would dare say a word agen them. But dearie me! I've asked you again and again to help them, and you always says yes; yet to this very day nothing has ever come of it. Well, what I thought was this, Mrs Lian. With this great blessing of Heaven that's come on the family on account of your eldest young lady, surely, I thought to myself, there must be jobs in this for *someone?* I'll talk to Mrs Lian about it, I said to myself; because if I rely on Master Lian to help us, we'll starve to death for certain sure!'

Xi-feng laughed.

'Leave your two boys to me, Nannie. I'll look after them! You know all about Lian's little ways because you nursed him when he was a baby: he'll give the dearest thing he has to some nobody he's picked up outside, yet his own two foster-brothers who are much nicer young men than any of his favourites he neglects completely. If only you would take a bit of interest in *them,* Lian, you wouldn't hear a word of .com-plaint from anyone, instead of wasting your kindnesses on those - those little *male misses* of yours! I shouldn't have called them "misses", though. You treat the *misses* as your *missus* and give me the *miss!'*

There was a loud laugh from everyone present, including Nannie Zhao, who concluded her cackles with a pious invocation:

'Bless his Holy Name! Here at last comes a just judge to

set all things to rights - But oh Mrs Lian, those naughty things you said about “misses”: that’s not my Master Lian. It’s just that he’s so soft-hearted he can’t bring himself to say ~’ no” to anyone who spins him a tale.’

‘Soft-hearted with his boy friends, maybe,’ said X~feng with a lubricious smile; ‘but when he has to do with us women he is hard enough.’

‘Tee, hee, hee, what a one you are, Mrs Lian! I don’t know when I was last so merry. Come on, let’s have another cup of that good wine!—Now that I’ve got Mrs Lian to stand up for me I shall have no more worries!’

Jia Lian was by now thoroughly embarrassed and laughed sheepishly.

‘Stop all this nonsense now and serve the rice I I’ve still got to go round to Cousin Zhen’s after this to discuss things.’

‘Ah yes,’ said Xi-feng. ‘We mustn’t make you late for that. What did Cousin Zhen want you for just now?’

‘It was about the visitation business,’ said Jia Lian.

‘Has it been settled, then?’

‘Well, not absolutely. Eight or nine parts settled, you might say.’

‘That’s a great favour of the Emperor’s, isn’t it?’ said Xi-feng. ‘Something you don’t hear of even in plays and stories about the olden days.’

‘Very true!’ chimed in Nannie Zhao. ‘But I must be getting old and stupid, for everywhere these last few days have been a-buzz with talk of “visitations”, but blessed if I can make head or tall of it. You tell us now: just what manner of thing is this “visitation”?’

Jia Lian undertook to do so.

‘Our present Emperor, who has always had a great sympathy for the common man, believes that the filial affection of a child for its parents is the most important thing in the world, and that family feeling is the same everywhere, irrespective of social rank. He has found that in his own case, even after seeing the Ex-Emperor and Ex-Empress morning, noon and night every day of his life, he is still unable to express more than a fraction of the devotion he feels for them; and this has led him to think of all those concubines and maids of honour and other court ladies, taken from their homes and shut up in the Palace for years and years on end, and to realize how much they must miss *their* parents. And from there he got to thinking of the parents themselves, how they must long for the daughters they can never see again. And then he thought what a crime against Nature it would be if any of those parents were to become ill as a result of not seeing their daughters. And so he addressed a Memorial to the Ex-Emperor and Ex-Empress requesting permission to allow the families of palace ladies to visit them in the Palace on the twelfth day of every month. When Their Old Majesties saw this Memorial they were very pleased and praised the Emperor for his piety and goodness—”doing Heaven’s work among men” they called it. But they pointed out in their Rescript that when the families of court ladies entered the Palace on these visits, they would inevitably be hampered by the restrictions of court etiquette in the expression of their natural feelings. So in the end, by an act of supreme generosity, the Emperor issued a special decree in which he said that, apart from allowing the families of court ladies to visit their daughters in the Palace on the twelfth day of each month, he would allow any family which had a separate house or annexe capable of being maintained in the degree of security specified for a temporary Imperial Residence to make written application for permission to receive a Visitation in their own home, where the pleasures of reunion could be enjoyed in an atmosphere of intimacy and affection. The proclamation of this decree has created quite a stir. The Imperial Concubine Lady Zhou’s father already has the builders at work on a special wing for visitations in his house, and Lady Wu’s father, Wu Tian-you, has been outside the city looking for a site. So it’s already eight or nine parts settled, as I said.’

‘Bless my soul! said Nannie Zhao. ‘So that’s what it is! Well, I suppose in that case we shall soon be getting ready to receive *our* young lady?’

‘Of course,’ said Jia Lian. ‘What else do you think we’re all so busy about?’

‘If we do receive her,’ said Xi-feng, ‘it should be an experience worth remembering. I’ve often wished I’d been born twenty or thirty years earlier so that the old folk wouldn’t be able to look down on me for having missed so much. To hear them talk about the Emperor Tai-zu’s Southern Progress is better than listening to a story-teller. How I wish I’d been there to see it all!’

‘Ah, now!’ said Nannie Zhao. *‘That’s* the sort of thing that scarce comes once in a thousand years! I was not so young then that I can’t still remember. The head of the Jia family in those days was Superintendant of Shipyards and Harbour Maint’nance in the Soochow-Yangchow area and was chosen to receive the Emperor on one of his visits. The way they spent silver on that visit, why, it was like pouring Out salt sea water! I call to mind...’

Xi-feng in her eagerness cut her short:

‘We Wangs received the Emperor on one of his visits, too. At that time my grandfather was in charge of all the foreign tribute and the embassies going up to Court. Whenever any foreigners arrived, it was always my family that put them up. All the goods brought by the foreign ships to the seaports in Kwangtung, Fukien, Yunnan and Chekiang passed through our hands.’

‘Everybody knows that,’ said Nannie Zhao. ‘There’s even a rhyme about it

> The King of the Ocean
> Goes along,
> When he’s short of gold beds,
> To the Nanking Wang.

That’s your family: the “ Nanking Wangs”. But then there’s the Zhens, who still live down that way in Kiangnan. Myword! There’s riches for you! That family alone received the Emperor *four times!* If I hadn’t seen with my own two eyes, I don’t care who told me, I wouldn’t have credited it, the sights I saw then! Never mind silver. Silver was just dirt to them. Every precious thing in the world you can think of they had there in mountains I Words like save and “spare” they just didn’t seem to know the meaning of!’

‘I believe you,’ said Xi-feng. ‘I’ve heard my grandfather talk about it, and he said it was just like that. But it still amazes me that a single family could have so much wealth.’

‘I’ll tell you something, Mrs Lian,’ said the knowledgeable Nannie. “Twere no more than paying for the Emperor’s entertainment with the Emperor’s own silver. No family that ever lived had money enough of its own to pay for such spectacles of vanity!’

While they were chatting, Lady Wang sent someone round to see if Xi-feng had finished her dinner yet. Xi-feng realized that there must be something which demanded her attention and, finishing hurriedly, rinsed Out her mouth and prepared to go. Before she could leave, however, the pages from the second gate announced the arrival of Jia Rong and Jia Qiang from the Ning-guo mansion next door. Jia Lian had just finished rinsing his mouth and was washing his hands in a basin held out for him by Patience when the two young men came into the room.

‘What is your message?’ he asked them.

Xi-feng, curious, stayed to hear.

‘Father sent us to tell you that the uncles have already reached a decision,’ said Jia Rong. ‘They have measured off an area just over a quarter of a mile square which takes in a part of our grounds, including the All-scents Garden, on the east side, and the north-west corner of your grounds on the west, to be turned into a Separate Residence for the Visitation. They’ve already commissioned someone to draw a plan, which should be ready

tomorrow. Father says as you've just got home he's sure you must be tired, so don't bother to come round tonight. if there's anything to discuss, you can tell him about it first thing tomorrow.'

'Thank your father for me very much,' said Jia Lian with a grateful smile. 'It is very good of him to let me off tonight, and I shall do as he says and not go over until tomorrow. I think the great advantage of this proposal is that it is so economical and makes the job of construction so much easier. It would mean very much more trouble if we were to build on land outside, yet at the same time we should lose the convenience this present scheme gives us of a single layout. Tell him when you get back that I think it is an excellent proposal, and that I leave it to him to protest in any way he thinks fit if the others show signs of going back on it. The one thing we must under no circumstances do is to go looking for land outside. Anyway, I shall be round to see him first thing tomorrow and we can talk about it in detail then.'

Jia Rong promised to retail this message.

Jia Qiang now stepped forward with a message of his own:

'Uncle Zhen has given me the job of going to Soochow to engage music and drama teachers and to buy girl players and instruments and costumes so. that we can have our own theatricals for the visitation. I'm to take Lai Sheng's two sons with me; and two of Great-uncle Zheng's gentlemen, Dan Ping-ren and Bu Gu-xiu, are coming as well. Uncle said I ought to have a word with you about it before I go.'

Jia Lian looked the youth up and down appraisingly and laughed:

'Do you think you are qualified for the job? It may not be a very big one, but I should say the pickings would be pretty good for someone who knew the ropes.'

Jia Qiang laughed too.

'I shall have to learn as I go along!'

Jia Rong, who was standing somewhat away. from the light, availed himself of the shadow's concealment to give Xi-feng's dress a surreptitious tug. She understood perfectly well what his meaning was, but pretended not to, dismissing him with a curt wave of the hand and addressing herself instead to Jia Lian:

'Don't be so officious, Lian! Cousin Zhen is no less capable of choosing the right person for the job than we are. What do you mean by asking the boy if he's qualified? He's as much qualified as any of the rest of us. He's old enough to have seen a pig run, even if he's not old enough to have eaten pork! In any case, I'm sure Cousin Zhen only chose him as a figurehead. You don't seriously suppose that he'll be the one to discuss prices and deal with the business side of the expedition?—*I* think myself it's a very good choice!'

'Of course it is,' said Jia Lian. 'I don't dispute it. I merely thought we ought to do a few of his sums for him before he goes. Where is the money for this coming from?' he asked Jia Qiang.

'We were discussing that just now,' said Jia Qiang. 'Gaffer Lai says that there's no point in taking money with us from here. He says the Zhens of Kiangnan hold fifty thousand taels of ours on deposit and he can give us a letter of credit to take to them when we go. We'll draw out thirty thousand first and leave the rest to buy lanterns, lamps, and curtains with later on.'

Jia Lian nodded appreciatively.

'Good idea.'

'Well, if that's all settled,' Xi-feng put in quickly, 'I've got two very reliable young men for you to take with you, Qiang. I'm sure you'll find them extremely useful.'

'What a coincidence I' said Jia Qiang. I was just about to ask if you could recommend a couple of helpers!'

He asked for their names, and Xi-feng turned to Nannie Zhao to supply them. But the old nurse was so bemused by all this talk of policy and high finance that she appeared to be in a sort of coma, which it took a sharp nudge from Patience to rouse her from. When she answered it was in a gabble, to make up for the awkward pause.

'One of them is called Zhao Tian-liang, the other is called Zhao Tian-dong.'

'Mind you don't forget!' said Xi-feng. 'Now I'm off to see to my own affairs.' And she left the room.

Jia Rong slipped out after her.

If you will make a list of all the things you want,' he said, smilingly and softly, 'I'll see that he gets them for you, gracious lady.'

'Gracious arseholes said Xi-feng. [1]Do you think you can buy my favour with a few knick-knacks? I don't like all this whispering in corners.'

She walked away without giving him a chance to reply.

Meanwhile Jia Qiang was making a somewhat similar proposal to Jia Lian.

If there's anything I can get for you while I'm away, Uncle, I shall be glad to wangle it.'

'My, my!' said Jia Lian. 'Let's not get carried away, then! I must say, for one who's only just started, you certainly haven't lost much time in picking up the tricks of the trade! Yes, I dare say I shall write and let you know if I find I'm short of anything.'

With these words he sent the two young men back to the other house. Their departure was followed by a succession of three or four visits by servants reporting on household matters, after which he felt so exhausted that he instructed the servants on the inner gate to refuse admittance to any others and to inform them that he would deal with their business next day. It was midnight by the time Xi-feng got back to bed.

But the affairs of that night are no part of our story.

Rising early next morning, Jia Lian first called on his father and uncles and then went to the Ning-guo mansion, where, with Cousin Zhen, he joined a group consisting of the older stewards and domestics and a few friends and clients of the family in making a complete survey of the Ning-guo and Rong-guo properties with a view to deciding where the various buildings of the Separate Residence should be sited. He also helped them interview the craftsmen who would undertake the work.

After the assembling of builders and artisans the assembling of materials began: a continuous flow of supplies converging on the site from every direction, from precious consignments of gold, silver, copper and tin, to huge, bulky loads of builder's clay, timber, bricks and tiles.

Various walls, including the surrounding walls of the All scents Garden, and some of the garden's pavilions were demolished so that the north-west part of the Ning-guo property and the large open court on the north-east side of Rong-guo House were thrown into a single site. A range of servants' quarters on the east side of the Rong-guo grounds had already been demolished. The Ning-guo and Rong-guo properties had previous to this been divided by an alley-way running from north to south between them, but as it was not a public thoroughfare, no problem as involved in closing it and incorporating part of it in the rest of the new site.

The All-scents Garden had been watered by a stream led in by a culvert which ran under a corner of the north wall. Now that the garden was being integrated in the larger site, it was no longer necessary to lead the water in at this point.

The artificial hills, rocks, trees and shrubs of All-scents Garden were, of course, insufficient for the whole of the new site; but the area occupied by Jia She was the original garden of Rong-guo House and plentifully supplied with bamboos, trees, rocks, pavillions, kiosks and pergolas capable of being moved elsewhere. By pooling the resources of these two garden—the All-scents Garden of Ning-guo House and the original Rong-guo garden where jia She lived— and redistributing them over a single area, it would be possible to make great economies in both labour and materials, and when the estimates came to be made it was found that the requirements, in terms of completely new materials, would be comparatively modest.

The conception as a whole and the designs for its execution were alike the work of a well-known landscape gardener familiar to all and sundry by the sobriquet of 'Horticultural Hu'.

Jia Zheng was unused to matters of a practical nature and left the management of men and the control of operations to a consortium consisting of Jia She, Cousin Zhen and Jia Lian, the stewards Lai Da, Lai Sheng and Lin Zhi-xiao, the Clerk of Stores Wu Xin-deng, and two of his literary gentle-men, Zhan Guang and Cheng Ri-xing. The digging of pools, the raising of hills, the sitting and erection of lodges and pavillions, the planting of

bamboos and flowers—in a word, all matters pertaining to the landscaping and layout of the gardens, were planned and supervised by Horticultural Hu. Jia Zheng would merely drop in occasionally when he got back from Court and look around. On any important matters he sought the advice of Jia She and the test.

Jia She led a life of cultured ease and never did anything. On routine matters of no great importance Cousin Zhen would either report to him in person or send him a brief note when the thing was done. If consultation was unavoidable, he would send along Lai Da or one of the others for a reply.

Jia Rong's sole task was to supervise the making of objects in gold and silver.

Jia Qiang had already left for Soochow.

Cousin Zhen, Lai Da and the test were the ones who did most of the real work. It was they who hired workmen, kept accounts, and supervised and inspected each lob as it was undertaken.

The amount of noise and activity generated by these operations could not be described in a few words, and for the time being we shall not attempt the task.

The family's recent preoccupation with these important developments had released Bao-yu from his father's periodical quizzing about the progress of his studies. Unfortunately the relief of mind which this would otherwise have afforded him was displaced by a grave concern for Qin Zhong, whose sick-ness seemed to be daily worsening. Under such circumstances it was impossible for him to feel happy about anything else.

One morning, just as he had finished washing and dressing and was thinking of going round to Grandmother Jia to ask if he might pay Qin Zhong another visit, he caught sight of Tealeaf dodging about behind the screen wall of the inner gate and evidently trying to catch his attention. Bao-yu hurried over to him.

'What is it?'

'Master Qin. He's dying!'

Bao-yu was stunned.

'Dying? When I saw him yesterday he seemed qulte lucid. How can he be dying so soon?'

'I don't know,' said Tealeaf. 'But that's what the old gaffer said just now who came round to tell .me.'

Bao-yu hurried back and told Grandmother Jia. She instructed some of the more reliable servants to go with him and briefly admonished him before he went:

'When you get there you may stay with him to the end, since you have been such good friends; but you must come back as soon as it is over. Don't hang about!'

Bao-yu hurried off to change, only to find, on re-emerging, that the carriage was still not ready. Anxious lest he should arrive too late, he ran up and down the courtyard in a frenzy of impatience, imploring the servants to make haste; and when it at last arrived, he flung himself in it and drove off at great speed, hotly pursued by Li Gui, Tealeaf and the others attending him.

The house, when they reached it, appeared silent and deserted. Entering together in a tight little knot, master and servants surged through like swarming bees to the inner apartment at the back where Qin Zhong lay, causing great consternation among the two aunts and half-dozen girl cousins who were tending him and who were unable to conceal themselves before the advent of this masculine invasion.

At this stage Qin Zhong had already lost consciousness several times and, in accordance with the Northern custom which forbids a sick man to breathe his last on the kang, had some time since been lifted on to a trestle bed to die. Bao-yu gave an involuntary cry when he saw where he was lying and broke into noisy weeping. He was quickly restrained by Li Gui:

'You know how delicate Master Qin is. I expect the kang was too hard for him and they have put him here so that he can lie a bit more easy. You mustn't cry like that or you will make him worse!'

Bao-yu held back his sobs and drew close to his dying friend. Qin Zhong's face was waxen. His eyes were closed tight and he seemed to breathe with difficulty, twisting his head from side to side on the pillow.

'Jing-qing, old fellow! It's me! It's Bao-yu!'—He called him several times, but Qin Zhong seemed unaware of his presence. Again he called:

‘It’s Bao-yu!’

In point of fact Qin Zhong’s soul had already left his body and the few faint gasps of breath in his failing lungs were the only life that now remained in it. The ministers of the underworld, armed with a warrant and chains to bind him with, were at that very moment confronting him; but his soul was refusing to go quietly. Remembering that he left no one behind him to look after his family’s affairs, and bethinking him of poor Sapientia whose whereabouts were still unknown, he entreated them most piteously to spare him. But the infernal visitants had no ear for his entreaties and silenced him with angry rebuke:

‘You’re *an* educated young fellow: haven’t you heard the saying

If Yama calls at midnight hour
No man can put off death till four—?

We ministers of the nether world, from the highest down to the lowest, all have unbending iron natures and—unlike the officials of the mortal world, who are always doing kindnesses and showing favours and inventing little tricks and dodges for frustrating the course of justice - we are incapable of showing partiality.’

Suddenly, above their angry shouting, Qin Zhong heard a tiny cry:

‘It’s Bao-yu!’

At once he renewed his entreaties:

‘Good gentlemen, be merciful! Give me just a moment *for* a few words with a very dear friend of mine, and I’ll be back directly!’

‘*What* is it now?’ asked the demons. ‘What friend?’

‘I won’t deceive you, gentlemen. It’s a descendant of the Duke of Rong-guo. His name is Bao-yu.’

‘*What?*’ screamed the officer in charge of the party in great alarm. He turned angrily on his demon minions;

‘I *told* you we ought to let him go back for a bit, but you wouldn’t listen. Now look what’s happened! He’s gone and called up a person full of life and health to come here right in our midst! This is terrible I’

The demons showed signs of disarray on observing their leader to be so affected, and there was some angry muttering:

‘Yer Honour was putting on a brave enough show a short while ago Why should the name “Bao-yu” throw you into such a state of commotion? If you ask us, seeing that he’s upper world and we’re lower world, there’s nothing to be afraid of. We might just as well carry this one off now and have done with it.’

The trepidation of their leader, who was perhaps thinking more of Bao-yu’s demon-repelling talisman than of its wearer, was far from comforted by this reflection.

‘No! No! No!’ he shouted, and compelled them to let the soul return to its body.

With the return of his soul Qin Zhong regained consciousness and opened his eyes. He could see Bao-yu standing beside him; but his throat was so choked with phlegm that he was unable to utter a word. He could only fasten his eyes on him and slowly shake his head. Then there was a rasping sound in his throat and he slid once more into the dark.

What followed will be told in the following chapter.

CHAPTER 17

The inspection of the new garden becomes
a test of talent
And Rong-guo House makes itself ready for
an important visitor

Now that Qin Zhong was indisputably dead, Bao-yu wept long and bitterly, and it was some time before Li Gui and the rest could cairn him. Even after their return he continued tearful and distressed. Grandmother Jia contributed thirty or forty taels towards Qin Zhong's funeral expenses and made additional provision for offerings to the dead. Bao-yu condoled and sacrificed, and on the seventh day followed his friend's coffin to the grave. He continued in daily grief for Qin Zhong for a very long time afterwards. But grief cannot mend our losses, and a day did at last arrive when he hid ceased to mourn.

*

One day Cousin Zhen came to *Jia* Zheng with his team of helpers to report that work on the new garden had been completed.

'Uncle She has already had a look,' said Cousin Zhen. 'Now we are only waiting for you to look round it to tell us if there is anything you think will need altering and also to decide what inscriptions ought to be used on the boards everywhere.'

Jia Zheng reflected a while in silence.

'These inscriptions are going to be difficult,' he said eventually. 'By rights, of course, Her Grace should have the privilege of doing them herself; but she can scarcely be expected to make them up out of her head without having seen any of the views which they are to describe. On the other hand, if we wait until she has already visited the garden before asking her, half the pleasure of the visit will be lost. All those prospects and pavilions—even the rocks and trees and flowers will seem somehow incomplete without that touch of poetry which only the written word can lend a scene.'

'My dear patron, you are so right,' said one of the literary gentlemen who sat with him. 'But we have had an idea. The inscriptions for the various parts of the garden obviously cannot be dispensed with; nor, equally obviously, can they be decided in advance. Our suggestion is that we should compose provisional names and couplets to suit the places where inscriptions are required, and have them painted on rectangular paper lanterns which can be hung up temporarily –either horizontally or vertically as the case may be—when Her Grace comes to visit. We can ask her to decide on the permanent names after she has inspected the garden. Is not this a solution of the dilemma?'

'It is indeed,' said Jia Zheng. 'when we look round the garden presently, we must all try to think of words that can be used. If they seem suitable, we can keep them for the lanterns. If not, we can call for Yu-cun to come and help us out.'

'Your own suggestions are sure to be admirable, Sir Zheng,' said the literary gentlemen ingratiatingly. 'There will be no need to call in Yu-cun.'

Jia Zheng smiled deprecatingly.

'I am afraid it is not as you imagine. In my youth I had at best only indifferent skill in the art of writing verses about natural objects - birds and flowers and scenery and the like; and now that I'm older and have to devote all my energies to official documents and government papers, I am even more Out of touch with this sort of thing than I was then; so that even if I were to try my hand at it, I fear that my efforts would be rather dull and pedantic ones. Instead of enhancing the interest and beauty of the garden, they would probably have a deadening effect upon both.'

'That doesn't matter,' the literary gentlemen replied. 'We can *all* try our hands at composing. If each of us contributes what he is best at, and if we then select the better attempts and reject the ones that are not so good, we should be able to manage all right.'

‘That seems to me a very good suggestion,’ said Jia Zheng. ‘As the weather today is so warm and pleasant, let us all go and take a turn round the garden now!’

So saying he rose to his feet and conducted his little retinue of literary luminaries towards the garden. Cousin Zhen hurried on ahead to warn those in charge that they were coming.

As Bao-yu was still in very low spirits these days because of his grief for Qin Zhong, Grandmother Jia had hit on the idea of sending him into the newly made garden to play. By unlucky chance she had selected this very day on which to try out her antidote. He had in fact only just entered the garden when Cousin Zhen came hurrying towards him.

‘Better get out of here!’ said Cousin Zhen with an amused smile. ‘Your father will be here directly!’

Bao-ya streaked back towards the gate, a string of nurses and pages hurrying at his heels. But he had only just turned the corner on coming out of it when he almost ran into the arms of Jia Zheng and his party coming from the opposite direction. Escape was impossible. He simply had to stand meekly to one side and await instructions.

Jia Zheng had recently received a favourable report on Bao-yu from his teacher Jia Dai-ru in which mention had been made of his skill in composing couplets. Although the boy showed no aptitude for serious study, Dai-ru had said, he nevertheless possessed a certain meretricious talent for versification not undeserving of commendation. Because of this report, Jia Zheng ordered Bao-yu to accompany him into the garden, intending to put his aptitude to the test. Bao-yu, who knew nothing either of Dai-ru’s report or of his father’s intentions, followed with trepidation.

As soon as they reached the gate they found Cousin Zhen at the head of a group of overseers waiting to learn Jia Zheng’s wishes.

‘I want you to close the gate,’ said Jia Zheng, ‘so that we can see what it looks like from outside before we go in.’

Cousin Zhen ordered the gate to be closed, and Jia Zheng stood back and studied it gravely.

It was a five-frame gate-building with a hump-backed roof of half-cylinder tiles. The wooden lattice-work of the doors and windows was finely carved and ingeniously patterned. The whole gatehouse was quite unadorned by colour or gilding, yet all was of the most exquisite workmanship. Its walls stood on a terrace of white marble carved with a pattern of passion-flowers in relief, and the garden’s whitewashed circumference wall to left and right of it had a footing made of black-and-white striped stone blocks arranged so that the stripes formed a simple pattern. Jia Zheng found the unostentatious simplicity of this entrance greatly to his liking, and after ordering the gates to be opened, passed on inside.

A cry of admiration escaped them as they entered, for there, immediately in front of them, screening everything else from their view, rose a steep, verdure-clad hill.

‘Without this hill,’ Jia Zheng somewhat otiosely observed, ‘the whole garden would be visible as one entered, and all its mystery would be lost.’

The literary gentlemen concurred. ‘Only a master of the art of landscape could have conceived so bold a stroke,’ said one of them.

As they gazed at this miniature mountain, they observed a great number of large white rocks in all kinds of grotesque and monstrous shapes, rising course above course up one of its sides, some recumbent, some upright or leaning at angles, their surfaces streaked and spotted with moss and lichen or half concealed by creepers, and with a narrow, zig-zag path only barely discernible to the eye winding up between them.

‘Let us begin our tour by following this path,’ said Jia Zheng. ‘If we work our way round towards the other side of the hill on our way back, we shall have made a complete circuit of the garden.’

He ordered Cousin Zhen to lead the way, and leaning on Bao-yu’s shoulder, began the winding ascent of the little mountain. Suddenly on the mountainside above his head, he noticed a white rock whose surface had been polished to mirror smo6thness and realized that this must be one of the places which had been prepared for an inscription.

‘Aha, gentlemen I’ said Jia Zheng turning back to address the others who were climbing up behind him. ‘What name are we going to choose for this mountain?’

Emerald Heights,’ said one.

‘Embroidery Hill,’ said another.

Another proposed that they should call it ‘Little Censer’ after the famous Censer Peak in Kiangsi. Another proposed ‘Little Zhong-nan’. Altogether some twenty or thirty names were suggested - none of them very seriously, since the literary gentlemen were aware that Jia Zheng intended to test Bao-yu and were anxious not to make the boy’s task too difficult. Bao-yu understood and was duly grateful.

When no more names were forthcoming Jia Zheng turned to Bao-yu and asked him to propose something himself.

‘I remember reading in some old book,’ said Bao-yu, ‘that “to recall old things is better than to invent new ones; and to recut an ancient text is better than to engrave a modern”. We ought, then, to choose something old. But as this is not the garden’s principal “mountain” or its chief vista, strictly speaking there is no justification for having an inscription here at all—unless it is to be something which implies that this is merely a first step towards more important things ahead. I suggest we should call it “Pathway to Mysteries” after the line in Chang Jian’s poem about the mountain temple:

A path winds upwards to mysterious places.

A name like that would be more distinguished.’

There was a chorus of praise from the literary gentlemen:

‘Exactly right! Wonderful! Our young friend with his natural talent and youthful imagination succeeds immediately where we old pedants fail I’

Jia Zheng gave a deprecatory laugh:

‘You mustn’t flatter the boy! People of his age are adept at making a little knowledge go a long way. I only asked him as a joke, to see what he would say. We shall have to think of a better name later on.’

As he spoke, they passed through a tunnel of rock in ~e mountain’s shoulder into an artificial ravine ablaze with the van-coloured flowers and foliage of many varieties of tree and shrub which grew there in great profusion. Down below, where the trees were thickest, a clear stream gushed between the rocks. After they had advanced a few paces in a somewhat northerly direction, the ravine broadened into a little flat-bottomed valley and the stream widened out to form a pool. Gaily painted and carved pavilions rose from the slopes on either side, their lower halves concealed amidst the trees, their tops reaching into the **blue**. In the midst of the prospect below them was a handsome bridge:

In a **green** ravine
A jade stream sped.
A stair of stone
Plunged to the brink.
where the water widened
To a placid pool,
A marble baluster
Ran round about.
A marble bridge crossed it
With triple span,
And a marble lion’s maw
Crowned each of the arches.

Over the centre of the bridge there was a little pavilion, which Jia Zheng and the others entered and sat down in.

‘Well, gentlemen!’ said Jia Zheng. ‘What are we going to call it?’

‘Ou-yang Xiu in his *Pavilion of the Old Drunkard* speaks of “a pavilion poised above the water”,’ said one of them. ‘what about “Poised Pavilion”?’

‘“Poised Pavilion” is good,’ said Jia Zheng, ‘but *this* pavilion was put here in order to dominate the water it stands over, and I think there ought to be some reference to water in its name. I seem to recollect that in that same essay you mention Ou-yang Xiu speaks of the water “gushing between twin peaks”. Could we not use the word “gushing” in some way?’

‘Yes, yes!’ said one of the literary gentlemen. ‘“Gushing Jade” would do splendidly.’

Jia Zheng fondled his beard meditatively, then turned to Bao-yu and asked him for *his* suggestion.

‘I agreed with what you said just now, Father,’ said Bao-yu, ‘but on second thoughts it seems to me that though it may have been all right for Ou-yang Xiu to use the word “gushing” in describing the source of the river Rang, it doesn’t really suit the water round this pavilion. Then again, as this is a Separate Residence specially designed for the reception of a royal personage, it seems to me that something rather formal is called for, and that an expression taken from the *Drunkard’s Pavilion* might seem a bit improper. I think we should try to find a rather more imaginative, less obvious sort of name.’

‘I hope you gentlemen are all taking this in!’ said Jia Zheng sarcastically, ‘You will observe that when we suggest something original we are recommended to prefer the old to the new, but that when we *do* make use of an old text we are “improper” and “unimaginative”! - Well, carry on then! Let’s have your suggestion!’

‘I think “Drenched Blossoms” would be more original and more tasteful than “Gushing Jade”.’

Jia Zheng stroked his beard and nodded silently. The literary gentlemen could see that he was pleased and hastened to commend Bao-yu’s remarkable ability.

‘That’s the two words for the framed board on top,’ said Jia Zheng. ‘*Not* a very difficult task. But what about the seven-word lines for the sides?’

Bao-yu glanced quickly round, seeking inspiration from the scene, and presently came up with the following couplet:

> ‘Three pole-thrust lengths of bankside willows **green,**
> One fragrant breath of bankside flowers sweet.’

Jia Zheng nodded and a barely perceptible smile played over his features. The literary gentlemen redoubled their praises.

They now left the pavilion and crossed to the other side of the pool. For a while they walked on, stopping from time to time to admire the various rocks and flowers and trees which they passed on their way, until suddenly they found themselves at the foot of a range of whitewashed walls enclosing a small retreat almost hidden among the hundreds and hundreds of **green** bamboos which grew in a dense thicket behind them. With cries of admiration they went inside. A cloister-like covered walk ran round the walls from the entrance to the back of the forecourt and a cobbled pathway up to the steps of the terrace. The house was a tiny three-frame one, two parts latticed, the third part windowless. The tables, chairs and couches which furnished it seemed to have been specially made to fit the interior. A door in the rear wall opened onto a garden of broadleaved plantains dominated by a large flowering pear-tree and overlooked on either side by two diminutive lodges built at right angles to the back of the house. A stream gushed through an opening at the foot of the garden wall into a channel barely a foot wide which ran to the foot of the rear terrace and thence round the side of the house to the front, where it meandered through the bamboos of the forecourt before finally disappearing through another Opening in the surrounding wall.

‘This must be a pleasant enough place at any time,’ said Jia Zheng with a smile. ‘But just imagine what it would be like to sit studying beside the window here on a moonlight night! It is pleasures like that which make a

man feel he has not lived in vain!'

As he spoke, his glance happened to fall on Bao-yu, who instantly became so embarrassed that he hung his head in shame. He was rescued by the timely intervention of the literary gentlemen who changed the subject from that of study to a less dangerous topic. Two of them suggested that the name given to this retreat should be a four-word one. Jia Zheng asked them what four words they proposed.

"'Where Bends the Qi" ' said one of them, no doubt having in mind the song in the *Poetry Classic* which begins with the words

> See in that nook where bends the Qi,
> The **green** bamboos, how graceful grown!

'No,' said Jia Zheng. 'Too obvious!'

'"North of the Sui",' said the other, evidently thinking of the ancient Rabbit Garden of the Prince of Liang in Suiyang—also famous for its bamboos and running water.

'No,' said jia Zheng. 'Still too obvious!'

'You'd better ask Cousin Bao again,' said Cousin Zhen, who stood by listening.

'He always insists on criticizing everyone else's suggestions before he will deign to make one of his own,' said Jia Zheng.

'He is a worthless creature.'

'That's all right,' said the others. 'His criticisms are very good ones. He is in no way to blame for making them.'

'You shouldn't let him get away with it!' said Jia Zheng. 'All right!' be went on, turning to Bao-yu. 'Today we will indulge you up to the hilt. Let's have your criticisms, and after that we'll hear your own proposal. What about the two suggestions that have. just been made? Do you think either of them could be used?'

'Neither of them seems quite right to me;' said Bao-yu in answer to the question.

'In what way "not quite right"?' said Jia Zheng with a scornful smile.

'Well,' said Bao-yu, 'This is the first building our visitor will enter when she looks over the garden, so there ought to be some word of praise for the Emperor at this point. If we want a classical reference with imperial symbolism, I suggest "The Phoenix Dance", alluding to that passage in the *History Classic* about the male and female phoenixes alighting "with measured gambollings" in the Emperor's courtyard.'

'What about "Bend of the Qi" and "North of the Sui"?' said Jia Zheng. 'Aren't they classical allusions? If not, I should like to know what they are!'

'Yes,' said Bao-yu, 'but they are too contrived. "The Phoenix Dance" is more fitting.'

There was a loud murmur of assent from the literary gentle-men. Jia Zhong nodded and tried not to look pleased.

'Young idiot!—A "small capacity but a great self-conceit", gentlemen—All right!' he ordered: 'now the couplet I'

So Bao-yu recited the following couplet:

> 'From the empty cauldron the steam still rises after the brewing of tea.
> By the darkening window the fingers are still cold after the game of Go.'

Jia Zheng shook his head:

'Nothing very remarkable about *that!'*

With this remark he began to move on, but thought of something just as they were leaving, and stopped to ask Cousin Zhen:

'I see that the buildings in this garden have their proper complement of chairs and tables and so forth. What

about blinds and curtains and flower-vases and all that sort of thing? Have they been selected to suit the individual rooms ?'

'As regards ornaments,' Cousin Zhen replied, 'we have already got in quite a large stock, and when the time comes we shall naturally select from it what is suitable for each individual room. As regards drapes and hangings, Cousin Lian told me yesterday that there are quite a lot yet to come. what we did was to take the measurements from the plans drawn up for the carpenters and put the work in hand straight away, even before the buildings were finished. As far as I know, up to yesterday we had received about half of what was ordered.'

From the way Cousin Zhen spoke, Jia Zheng gathered that this was not his responsibility and sent someone to summon Jia Lian. He arrived within moments, and Jia Zheng questioned him about the types and quantities ordered and the figures for what had already been received and what was still to come.

In response to his inquiry Jia Lian extracted a wallet from the leg of his boot, and glancing at a folded schedule inside it summarized its contents as follows:

'Curtains, large and small, in various silks and satins—flowered, dragon-spot, sprigged, tapestry, panelled, ink-splash: one hundred and twenty. —Eighty of those were delivered yesterday. That leaves forty to come. —Blinds: two hundred. —Yes. They all arrived yesterday. But then there are the special ones. —Blinds, **scarlet** felt: two hundred. Speckled bamboo: one hundred. **Red** lacquered bamboo with gold fleck: one hundred. Black lacquered bamboo: one hundred. Coloured net: two hundred. —We now have half of each of those four kinds. The other half is promised by the end of autumn. —Chair-covers, table-drapes, valances, tablecloths: one thousand two hundred of each. —Those we already have.'

They had been moving on as he spoke, but were presently brought to a halt by a steeply sloping hill which rose up in front of them. Having negotiated its foot, they could see, almost concealed in a fold half-way up the other side of it, a dim-coloured adobe wall crowned with a coping of rice-straw thatch. Inside it were several hundred apricot trees, whose flowering tops resembled the billowing rosy clouds of some vegetable volcano. In their midst stood a little group of reed-thatched cottages. Beyond the wall, with a barred gate dividing it in the middle, a loose hedge of irregular shape had been made by weaving together the pliant young shoots of the mulberry, elm, hibiscus, and silkworm thorn trees which grew outside it. Between this hedge of trees and the lower slope of the hill was a rustic well, furnished with both well-sweep and windlass. Below the well, row upon row of miniature fields full of healthy-looking vegetables and flowers ran down in variegated strips to the bottom.

'Ah, now here is a place with a purpose!' said Jia Zheng with a pleased smile. It may have been made by human artifice, but the sight of it is none the less moving. In me it awakens the desire to get back to the land, to a life of rural simplicity. Let us go in and rest a while!'

They were just on the point of entering the gate in the hedge when they observed a stone at the side of the pathway leading up to it which had evidently been put there in order that the name of the place might be inscribed upon it.

'What a brilliant idea!' the literary gentlemen exclaimed. 'If they had put a board up over the gate, the rustic atmosphere would have been completely destroyed, whereas this stone actually enhances it. This is a place which calls for the bucolic talent of a Fan Cheng-da to do it justice!'

'What shall we call it, then?' asked Jia Zheng.

'Just now our young friend was saying that to "recall an bid thing is better than to invent a new one",' said one of the literary gentlemen. 'In this case the ancients have already provided the perfect name: "Apricot Village".'

Jia Zheng knew that he was referring to the words of the fainting traveller in Du Mu's poem:

> 'Where's the tavern?' I cry, and a lad points the way
> To a village far off in the apricot trees.

He turned to Cousin Zhen with a smile:

'Yes. That reminds me. There's just one thing missing here: an inn-sign. Tomorrow you must have one made. Nothing fancy. Just an ordinary inn-sign like the ones you see in country villages outside. And it should hang from a bamboo pole above the tree-tops.'

Cousin Zhen promised to see this done and added a suggestion of his own:

'The birds here, too, ought to be ordinary farmyard ones -hens, ducks, geese, and so on—to be in keeping with the surroundings.'

Jia Zheng and the rest agreed enthusiastically.

'The only trouble with "Apricot Village",' said Jia Zheng, '–though it would suit the place very well—is that it is the name of a real village; so we should have to get official per-mission first before we could use it.'

'Ah, yes,' said the others. 'That means we still have to think of something for a temporary name. Now what shall it be?'

While they were all still thinking, Bao-yu who had already had an idea, was so bursting with eagerness that he broke in' without waiting to be invited by his father:

'There is an old poem which has the lines

Above the flowering apricot
A hopeful inn-sign hangs.

For the inscription on the stone we ought to have "The Hopeful Sign".'

'"The Hopeful Sign",' echoed the literary gentlemen admiringly. 'Very good! The hidden allusion to "Apricot Village" is most ingenious!'

'Oh, as for the name of the village,' said Bao-yu scornfully, '"Apricot Village" is much too obvious! why not "Sweet-rice Village" from the words of the old poem:

A cottage by the water stands
Where Sweet the young rice smells?'

The literary gentlemen clapped their hands delightedly; but their cries of admiration were cut short by an angry shout from Jia Zheng:

'Ignorant young puppy! Just how many "old poets" and "old poems" do you think you know, that you should presume to show off in front of your elders in this impertinent manner? We let you have your little say just now in order to test your intelligence. It was no more than a joke. Do you suppose we are seriously interested in your opinions?'

They had been moving on meanwhile, and he now led them into the largest of the little thatched buildings, from whose simple interior with its paper windows and plain deal furniture all hint of urban refinement had been banished. Jia Zheng was inwardly pleased. He stared hard at Bao-yu

'How do you like *this* place, then?'

With secret winks and nods the literary gentlemen urged Bao-yu to make a favourable reply, but he willfully ignored their promptings.

'Not nearly as much as "The Phoenix Dance".'

His father snorted disgustedly.

'Ignoramus I You have eyes only for painted halls and gaudy pavilions—the rubbishy trappings of wealth. what can *you* know of the beauty that lies in quietness and natural simplicity? This is a consequence of your refusal to study properly.'

'Your rebuke is, of course, justified, Father,' Bao-yu replied promptly, 'but then I have never really understood

what it was the ancients *meant* by "natural".'

The literary gentlemen, who had observed a vein of mulishness in Bao-yu which boded trouble, were surprised by the seeming naïveté of this reply.

'Why, fancy not knowing what "natural" means - you who have such a good understanding of so much else! "Natural" is that which is *of nature*, that is to say, that which is produced by nature as opposed to that which is produced by human artifice.'

'There you are, you see!' said Bao-yu. 'A farm set down in the middle of a place like this is obviously the product of human artifice. There are no neighbouring villages, no distant prospects of city walls; the mountain at the back doesn't belong to any system; there is no pagoda rising from some tree-hid monastery in the hills above; there is no bridge below leading to a near-by market town. It sticks up out of nowhere, in total isolation from everything else. It isn't even a particularly remarkable view—not nearly so "natural" in either form or spirit as those other places we have seen. The bam boos in those other places may have been planted by human hand and the streams diverted out of their natural courses, but there was no *appearance* of artifice. That's why, when the ancients use the term "natural" I have my doubts about what they really meant. For example, when they speak of a "natural painting", I can't help wondering if they are not referring to precisely that forcible interference with the landscape to which I object: putting hills where they are not meant to be, and that sort of thing. However great the skill with which this is done, the results are never quite …"

His discourse was cut short by an outburst of rage from Jia Zheng.

'Take that boy out of here!'

Bao-yu fled.

'Come back!'

He returned.

'You still have to make a couplet on this place. If it isn't satisfactory, you will find yourself reciting it to the tune of a slapped face!'

Bao-yu stood quivering with fright and for some moments was unable to say anything. At last he recited the following couplet:

'Emergent buds swell where the washerwoman soaks her cloth.
A fresh tang rises where the cress-gatherer fills his pannier.'

Jia Zheng shook his head:

'Worse and worse.'

He led them out of the 'village' and round the foot of the hill:

through flowers and foliage,
by rock and rivulet,
past rose-crowned pergolas
and rose-twined trellises,
through small pavilions
embowered in peonies,
where scent of sweet-briers stole,
or pliant plantains waved –

until they came to a place where a musical murmur of water issued from a cave in the rock. The cave was half-veiled by a **green** curtain of creeper, and the water below was starred with bobbing blossoms.

'What a delightful spot!' the literary gentlemen exclaimed. 'Very well, gentlemen. What are you going to call it?' said Jia Zheng.

Inevitably the literary gentlemen thought of Tao Yuanming's fisherman of Wu-ling and his Peach-blossom

Stream.

‘“The Wu-ling Stream”,’ said one of them. ‘The name is ready-made for this place. No need to look further than that.’

Jia Zheng laughed:

‘The same trouble again, I am afraid. It is the name of a real place. In any case, it is too hackneyed.’

‘All tight,’ said the others good-humouredly. ‘In that case simply call it “Refuge of the Qins”.’ Their minds still ran on the Peach-blossom Stream and its hidden paradise.

‘That’s even more inappropriate!’ said Bao-yu. ‘“Refuge of the Qins” would imply that the people here were fugitives from tyranny. How can we possibly call it that? I suggest “Smartweed Bank and Flowery Harbour”.’

‘Rubbish!’ said Jia Zheng. He looked inside the grotto and asked Cousin Zhen if there were any boats.

‘Four punts for lotus-gathering and one for pleasure are on order,’ said Cousin Zhen, ‘but they haven’t finished making them yet.’

‘What a pity we cannot go through!’ said Jia Zheng.

‘There is a very steep path over the top which would take us there,’ said Cousin Zhen, and proceeded to lead the way.

The others scrambled up after him, clinging to creepers and leaning on tree-trunks as they Went. when, having descended more, they had regained the stream it was wide and deep once

and distorted by many anfractuosities. The fallen blossoms seemed to be even more numerous and the waters on whose surface they floated even more limpid than they had been on the side they had just come from. The weeping willows which lined both banks were here and there diversified with peach and apricot trees whose interlacing branches made little worlds of stillness and serenity beneath them.

Suddenly, through the **green** of the willows, they glimpsed the **scarlet** balustrade of a wooden bridge whose sloping ramps led to a flat central span high above the water. when they had crossed it, they found a choice of paths leading to different parts of the garden. Ahead was an airy building with roofs of tile, whose elegant surrounding wall was of grey-plastered brick pierced by ornamental grilles made of semi-circular tiles laid together in openwork patterns. The wall was so constructed that outcrops of rock from the garden’s ‘master mountain appeared to run through it in several places into the courtyard inside.

‘This building seems rather out of place here,’ said Jia Zheng.

But as he entered the gate the source of his annoyance disappeared; for a miniature mountain of rock, whose many holes and fissures, worn through it by weathering or the wash of waters, bestowed on it a misleading appearance of fragile delicacy, towered up in front of him and combined with the many smaller rocks of various shapes and sizes which surrounded it to efface from their view every vestige of the building they had just been looking at.

Not a single tree grew in this enclosure, only plants and herbs:

some aspired as vines,
some crept humbly on the ground;
some grew down from the tops of rocks,
some upwards from their feet;
some hung from the eaves in waving trails of **green,**
some clung to pillars in circling bands of gold;
some had blood-red berries,
some had golden flowers.

And from every flower and every plant and every herb wafted the most exquisite and incomparable fragrances.

Jia Zheng could not help but admire:

‘Charming! But what *are* they all?’

‘Wild-fig’ and ‘wistaria’ was all the literary gentlemen would venture.

‘But surely,’ Jia Zheng objected, ‘wild-fig and wisteria do not have this delectable fragrance?’

‘They certainly don’t,’ said Bao-yu. ‘There *are* wild-fig and wisteria among the plants growing here, but the ones with the fragrance are pollia and birthwort and - yes, I think those are orchids of some kind. That one over there is probably actinidia. The **red** flowers are, of course, rue, the “herb of grace”, and the **green** ones must be **green**-flag. A lot of these rare plants are mentioned in *Li sao* and *Wen xuan*, particularly in the *Poetical Descriptions of the Three Capitals* by Zuo Si. For example, in his *Description* of *the Wu Capital* he has

agastache, eulalia,
and harsh-smelling ginger-bush,
cord-flower, cable-flower,
centaury and **purple**strife,
stone-sail and water-pine
and sweet-scented eglantine...

And then there are

amaranth, xanthoxylon,
anemone, phellopteron...

They come in the *Description of the Shu Capital*. Of course, after all these centuries nobody *really* knows what all those names stand for. They apply them quite arbitrarily to whatever seem to fit the description, and gradually all of them—’

Once more an angry shout from his father cut him short:

‘Who asked for your opinion?’

Bao-yu shrank back and said no more.

Observing that there were balustraded loggias on either side of the court, Jia Zheng led his party through one of them towards the building at the rear. It was a cool, five-frame gallery with a low, roofed verandah running round it on all sides. The window4attices were **green** and tile walls freshly painted. It was a building of quite another order of elegance from the ones they had so far visited.

‘Anyone who sat sipping tea and playing the *qin* to himself on this verandah would have no need to burn incense if he wanted sweet smells for his inspiration,’ said Jia Zheng dreamily. ‘So unexpectedly beautiful a place calls for a specially beautiful name to adorn it.’

‘What could be better than “Dewy Orchids”?’ said the literary gentleman.

‘Yes,’ said Jia Zheng. ‘That would do for the name. Now what about the couplet?’

‘*I* have thought of a couplet,’ said one of the gentlemen. ‘Tell me all of you what you think of it:

A musky perfume of orchids hangs in the sunset courtyard.
A sweet aroma of galingale floats over the moonlit island.’

‘Not bad,’ said the others. ‘But why “*sunset* courtyard”?’

‘I was thinking of that line in the old poem,’ said the man:

‘The garden’s gillyflowers at sunset weep.

After all, you have already got “dewy” in the name. I thought the “sunset weeping” would go with it rather well.’

‘Feeble! Feeble!’ cried the rest.

‘I’ve thought of a couplet, too,’ said one of the others. ‘Let me have your opinion of it:

Down garden walks a fragrant breeze caresses beds of melilot.
By courtyard walls a brilliant moon illumines golden orchises.’

Jia Zheng stroked his beard, and his lips were observed to move as though he was on the point of proposing a couplet of his own. Suddenly, looking up, he caught sight of Bao-yu skulking behind the others, too scared to speak.

‘What’s the matter with you?’ he bellowed at the unfortunate boy. ‘You are ready enough with your opinions when they are not wanted. Speak up! —Or are you waiting for a written invitation?’

‘I can see no “musk” or “moonlight” or “islands” in this place,’ said Bao-yu, ‘If we are to make couplets in this follow-my-leader fashion, we could turn out a couple of hundred of them and still have more to come.’

‘No one’s twisting your arm,’ said Jia Zheng. ‘You don’t *have* to use those words if you don’t want to.’

‘In that case,’ said Bao-yu, ‘I suggest “The Garden of Spices” for the name; and for the couplet:

Composing amidst cardamoms, you shall make verses like flowers.
Slumbering amidst the roses, you shall dream fragrant dreams.’

‘We all know where you got *that* from,’ said Jia zheng:

‘Composing midst the plantains
Green shall my verses he.

We can’t give you much credit for an imitation.,

‘Not at all! said the literary gentlemen. ‘There is nothing wrong with imitation provided it is done well. After all, Li Bo’s poem “On Phoenix Terrace” is entirely based on Hao’s “**Yellow** Crane Tower”, yet it is a much better poem. On reflection our young friend’s couplet seems more poetical and imaginative than the original.’

‘Oh, come now!’ said Jia Zheng. But they could see he was not displeased.

Leaving the place of many fragrances behind them, they had not advanced much further when they could see ahead of them a building of great magnificence which Jia Theng at once identified as the main reception hall of the Residence.

Roof above roof soared,
Eye up-compelling,
Of richly-wrought chambers
And high winding galleries.
Green rafts of dark pine
Brushed the eaves’ edges.
Milky magnolias
Bordered the buildings.
Gold-glinting cat-faces,
Rainbow-hued serpents’ snouts
Peered out or snarled down
From cornice and finial.

‘It is rather a showy building,’ said Jia Zheng. But the literary gentlemen reassured him:

‘Although Her Grace is a person of simple and abstemious tastes, the exalted position she now occupies makes it only right and proper that there should be a certain amount of pomp in her reception. This building is in

no way excessive.'

Still advancing in the same direction, they presently found themselves at the foot of the white marble memorial arch which framed the approach to the hall. The pattern of writhing dragons protectively crouched over its uppermost horizontal was so pierced and fretted by the sculptor's artistry as to resemble lacework rather than solid stone.

'What inscription do we want on this arch?' Jia Zheng inquired.

'"Peng-lai's Fairy Precincts" is the only name that would do it justice,' said the literary gentlemen.

Jia Zheng shook his head and said nothing.

The sight of this building and its arch had inspired a strange and unaccountable stir of emotion in Bao-yu which on reflection he interpreted as a sign that he must have known a building somewhat like this before - though where or when he could not for the life of him remember. He was still racking his brains to recall what it reminded him of; when Jia Zheng ordered him to produce a name and couplet for the arch, and he was quite unable to give his mind to the task of composition. The literary gentlemen, not knowing the nature of his preoccupation, supposed that his father's incessant bullying had worn him out and that he had finally come to the end of his inspiration. They feared that further bullying might once more bring out the mulish streak in him, thereby provoking an explosion which would be distasteful for everybody. Accordingly they urged Jia Zheng to allow him a day's grace in which to produce something suitable. Jia Zheng, who was secretly beginning to be apprehensive about the possible consequences of Grandmother Jia's anxiety for her darling grandson, yielded, albeit with a bad grace:

'Jackanapes! So even you have your off moments it seem.. Well, I'll give you a day to do it in. But woe betide you if you can't produce something tomorrow! And it had better be something good, too, because this is the most important building in the garden.'

After they had seen over the building and come out again, they stopped for a while on the terrace to look at a general view of the whole garden and attempted to make out the places they had already visited. They were surprised to find that even now they had covered little more than half of the whole area. Just at that moment a servant came up to report that someone had arrived with a message from Yu-cun.

'I can see that we shan't be able to finish today,' said Jia Zheng. However, if we go out by the way I said, we should at least be able to get some idea of the general layout.'

He conducted them to a large bridge above a crystal curtain of rushing water. It was the weir through which the water from the little river which fed all the pools and watercourses of the garden ran into it from outside. Jia Zheng invited them to name it.

'This is the source of the "Drenched Blossoms" stream we looked at earlier on,' said Bao-yu. 'We should call it "Drenched Blossoms Weir".'

'Rubbish!' said Jia Zheng. 'You may as well forget about your "Drenched Blossoms", because we are not going to use that name!'

Their progress continued past many unexplored features of the garden, viz:

a summer lodge
a straw-thatched cot
a dry-stone wall
a flowering arch
a tiny temple nestling beneath a hill
a nun's retreat hidden in a little wood
a straight gallery
a crooked cave
a square pavilion
and a round belvedere.

But Jia Zheng hurried past every one of them without entering. However, he had now been walking for a very long time without a rest and was beginning to feel somewhat footsore; and so, when the next building appeared through the trees ahead, he proposed that they should go in and sit down, and led his party towards it by the quickest route possible. They had to walk round a stand of double-flowering ornamental peach-trees and through a circular opening in a flower-covered bamboo trellis This brought them in sight of the building's whitewashed enclosing wall and the contrasting **green** of the weeping willows which surrounded it. A roofed gallery ran from each side of the gate round the inner wall of the forecourt, in which a few rocks were scattered. On one side of it some **green** plantains were growing and on the other a weeping variety of Szechwan crab, whose pendant clusters of double-flowering carmine blossoms hung by stems as delicate as golden wires on the umbrella-shaped canopy of its boughs.

'What magnificent blossom!' exclaimed the literary gentlemen. 'One has seen plenty of crab-apple blossom before) but never anything as beautiful as this.'

'This kind is called "maiden crab",' said Jia Zheng. 'It comes from abroad. According to vulgar belief it originally came from the Land of Maidens, and that is supposed to be the reason why it blooms so profusely. Needless to say, it is only the ignorant sort of persons who hold this ridiculous belief.'

'It certainly has most unusual blossoms,' said the literary gentlemen. 'Who knows, perhaps there is something in the popular belief.'

'Surely,' said Bao-yu, 'it is much mote probable that poets and painters gave it the name of "maiden crab" because of its rouge-like colour and delicate, drooping shape, and that the name was misunderstood by ignorant, literal-minded people, who made up this silly story to account for it.'

'That must be it!' said the literary gentlemen. 'Most grateful for the explanation!'

While they were speaking they were at the same time arranging themselves on some benches in the gallery.

'Has anyone an original idea for a name?' said Jia Zheng when they were all seated.

One of them proposed 'Storks in the Plantains'. Another suggested 'Shimmering Splendour'.

"'Shimmering Splendour",' Jia Zheng and the others repeated, trying out the words. 'That's good!'

'A lovely name!' said Bao-yu. But a moment later he added: 'Rather a pity, though.'

'Why "rather a pity"?' they asked.

'Well,' said Bao-yu, 'there are both plantains and crab-apple blossom in this courtyard. Whoever planted them must have been thinking of "the **red** and the **green**". If our name mentions only one and leaves Out the other, it will seem somehow inadequate.'

'What do you suggest, then?' said Jia Zheng.

'I suggest "Fragrant **Red** and Lucent **Green**",' said Bao-yu. 'That takes account of both of them.'

Jia zheng shook his head:

'No, that's no good!'

He led them inside the building. Its interior turned out to be all corridors and alcoves and galleries, so that properly speaking it could hardly have been said to have *rooms* at all. The partition walls which made these divisions were of wooden panelling exquisitely carved in a wide variety of motifs: bats in clouds, the 'three friends of winter'—pine, plum and bamboo, little figures in landscapes, birds and flowers, scrollwork, antique bronze shapes, 'good luck' and 'long life' characters, and many others. The carvings, all of them the work of master craftsmen, were beautified with in-lays of gold, mother-o'-pearl and semi-precious stones. In addition to being panelled, the partitions were pierced by numerous apertures, some round, some square, some sun-flower-shaped, some shaped like a fleur-de-lis, some cusped, ~me fan-shaped. Shelving was concealed in the double thickness of the partition at the base of these apertures, making it possible to use them for storing books and writing materials and for the display of antique bronzes, vases of flowers, miniature tray-gardens and the like. The overall effect was at once richly colourful and, because of the many apertures, airy and graceful.

The *trompe-l'ail* effect of these ingenious partitions had been further enhanced by inserting false windows

and doors in them, the former covered in various pastel shades of gauze, the latter hung with richly-patterned damask portieres. The main walls were pierced with window-like perforations in the shape of zithers, swords, vases and other objects of virtù.

The literary gentlemen were rapturous:

'Exquisite!' they cried. 'what marvellous workmanship!'

Jia Zheng, after taking no more than a couple of turns inside this confusing interior, was already lost. To the left of him was what appeared to be a door. To the right was a wall with a window in it. But on raising its portiere he discovered the door to be a bookcase; and when, looking back, he observed - what he had not noticed before—that the light coming in through the silk gauze of the window illuminated a passage-way leading to an open doorway, and began walking towards it, a party of gentlemen similar to his own came advancing to meet him, and he realized that he was walking towards a large mirror. They were able to circumvent the mirror, but only to find an even more bewildering choice of doorways on the other side.

'Come!' said Cousin Zhen with a laugh. 'Let me show you the way! If we go out here we shall be in the back courtyard. We can reach the gate of the garden much more easily from the back courtyard than from the front.'

He led them round the gauze hangings of a summer-bed, then through a door into a garden full of rambler roses. Behind the rose-trellis was a stream running between **green** banks. The literary gentlemen were intrigued to know where the water came from. Cousin Zhen pointed in the direction of the weir they had visited earlier:

'The water comes in over that weir, then through the grotto, then under the lea of the north-east "mountain" to the little farm. There a channel is led off it which runs into the south-east corner of the garden. Then it runs round and rejoins the main stream here. And from here the water flows out again underneath that wall.'

'How very ingenious!'

They moved on again, but soon found themselves at the foot of a tall 'mountain'.

'Follow me!' said Cousin Zhen, amused at the bewilderment of the others, who were now complet4y at sea as to their whereabouts. He led them round the foot of the 'mountain'—and there, miraculously, was a broad, flat path and the gate by which they had entered, rising majestically in front of them.

'Well!' exclaimed the literary gentlemen. 'This beats every-thing! The skill with which this has all been designed is quite out of this world!'

Whereupon they all went out of the garden.

*

Bao-yu was now longing to get back to the girls, but as no dismissal was forthcoming from his father, he followed him along with the others into his study. Fortunately Jia Zheng suddenly recollected that Bao-yu was still with him:

'Well, run along then! Your grandmother will be worrying about you. I take it you're not still waiting for more?'

At last Bao-yu could withdraw. But as soon as he was in the courtyard outside, he was waylaid by a group of Jia Zheng's pages who laid hands on him and prevented him from going.

'You've done well today, haven't you, coming out top with all those poems? You have *us* to thank for that! Her Old Ladyship sent round several times asking about you, but because the Master was so pleased with you, we told her not to worry. If we hadn't done that, you wouldn't have had the chance to show off your poems I Everyone says they were better than all the others. What about sharing your good luck with us?'

Bao-yu laughed good-naturedly.

'All right. A string of cash each.'

'Who wants a measly string of cash? Give us that little purse you're wearing!' And without a 'by your leave' they began to despoil him, beginning with the purse and his fan-case, of all his trinkets, until every one of the objects he carried about him had been taken from him.

‘Now,’ they said, ‘we’ll see you back in style!’

And closing round him, they marched him back to Grand-mother Jia’s apartment in triumphal procession.

Grandmother Jia had been waiting for him with some anxiety, and was naturally delighted to see him come in apparently none the worse for his experience.

Soon after, when he was back in his own room, Aroma came in to pour him some tea and noticed that all the little objects he usually carried about his waist had disappeared.

‘Where have the things from your belt gone?’ she said. ‘I suppose those worthless pages have taken them again.’

Dai-yu overheard her and came up to inspect. Sure enough, not one of the things was there.

‘So you’ve given away that little purse I gave you? Very well, then. You needn’t expect me to give you anything in future, however much you want it!’

With these words she went off to her own room in a temper, and taking up a still unfinished perfume sachet which she was making for him at his own request, she began to cut it up with her embroidery scissors. Bao-yu, observing that she was angry, had hurried after her—but it was too late. The sachet was already cut to pieces.

Although it had not been finished, Bao-yu could see that the embroidery was very fine, and it made him angry to think of the hours and hours of work so wantonly destroyed. Tearing open his collar he took Out the little embroidered purse which had all along been hanging round his neck and held it out for her to see.

‘Look! what’s that? when have I ever given anything of yours to someone else?’

Dai-yu knew that he must have treasured her gift to have worn it inside his clothing where there was no risk of its being taken from him. She regretted her over-hasty destruction of the sachet and hung her head in silence.

‘You needn’t have cut it up,’ said Bao-yu. ‘I know it’s only because you hate giving things away. Here, you can have this back too since you’re so stingy!’

He tossed the purse into her lap and turned to go. Dai-yu burst into tears of rage, and picking up the little purse, attacked that too with her scissors. Bao-yu hurried back and caught her by the wrist.

‘Come, cuzzy dear!’ he said with a laugh. ‘Have mercy on it!’

Dai-yu threw down the scissors and wiped her streaming eyes.

‘You shouldn’t blow hot and cold by turns. If you want to quarrel, let’s quarrel properly and have nothing to do with each other!’

She got up on the kang in a great huff, and turning her back on him, sobbed into her handkerchief and affected to ignore his presence. But Bao-yu got up beside her, and with many soothing words and affectionate endearments humbly entreated her forgiveness.

Meanwhile in the front room Grandmother Jia was calling loudly for her beloved grandson.

‘Master Bao is in the back with Miss Lin,’ they told her.

‘Ah, good!’ said the old lady. ‘Let us leave them alone together, then. it will be a nice relaxation for him after the strain of being so long with his father - as long as they don’t argue.’

‘Yes, milady.’

Finding herself unable to shake off Bao-yu’s attentions, *Dai-yu* got up from the kang:

‘I can see you are determined not to let me live in peace. I shall just have to go elsewhere.’ And off she went.

‘Wherever you go, I shall go with you,’ said Bao-yu, taking up the purse and beginning to fasten it on again. But Dai-yu snatched it away from him.

‘First you say you don’t want it, and now you are trying to put it on again. You ought to be ashamed of yourself!’ Her anger dissolved in a little explosion of laughter.

‘Dearest cuzzy!’ said Bao-yu. ‘Won’t you please make me another sachet?’

‘That depends on whether I feel in the mood or not,’ said Dai-yu.

Chatting together they went out of the room and round to Lady Wang’s apartment. Bao-chai was there already. They found everyone there in a state of great excitement owing to the fact that Jia Qiang had lust arrived back

from Soochow with the twelve child-actresses he had purchased there, together with their instructors and all the costumes and properties they would use in performing their plays.

Aunt Xue had now moved to a quiet, secluded apartment m the north-east corner of the mansion, and Pear-tree Court was undergoing alterations for use as a drama school where the instructors could train and rehearse their little charges. A number of female members of the Rong-guo staff who had some previous training in singing and acting—they were all grey-haired old women by now—were put in charge of the domestic arrangements. Pay and expenses and the provision of whatever was needed for the maintenance of the troupe was to remain in the hands of Jia Qiang, who was also to keep the accounts.

Simultaneously with this arrival, Lin Zhi-xiao's wife had come to announce that the selection and purchase of twenty-four little nuns—twelve Buddhist and twelve Taoist—had been successfully accomplished. Even the twenty-four little habits they would wear had now arrived brand-new from the tailor. But that was not all. It appeared that a young lady who had entered the church under half vows as an 'unshaved nun' might be persuaded to loin them.

'She comes of a highly educated official family from Soochow,' Lin Zhi-xiao's wife told them. 'As a child she was always ailing and her parents paid for any number of "proxy novices" in the hope that she would get better; but all was of no avail. In the end there was nothing for it but for the young lady to take the great step herself - though as a lay sister, without the shaving of hair. And sure enough her illness got better immediately. She is now eighteen years of age. Her name in religion is "Adamantina". She lost both her parents some time ago and has only two old nurses and a little maid to look after her. She's said to be a great clerk and knows all the classics by heart. What's more, she is a very handsome young woman. She moved into this area with her teacher a year ago because of some relic of Guanyin she had heard about and because there are some old Sanskrit texts here that she wanted to look at. She has been living ever since in the Sakyamuni Convent outside the west gate. Her teacher was a great authority on the "Primordial" branch of the Tantra. She died last winter. As she lay dying she told Adamantina that she was not to go back home, but to wait here quietly for a call. That is why she stays on here and has never taken her teacher's coffin back.'

'We should certainly take advantage of this to invite her here,' said Lady Wang.

'We have tried asking her,' said Lin Zhi-xiao's wife, 'but the reply she gives is that noble households are given to trampling on other people's feelings, and she is not disposed to be trampled on.'

'She is bound to be rather a 'proud young woman, coming -from a family of officials,' said Lady Wang. 'I don't see why we shouldn't make out a written invitation and request her formally.'

Lin Zhi-xiao's wife promised to see this done and hurried off to ask one of the professional letter-writers in the family's employment to make out a formal invitation. Next day a carriage was sent round to fetch Adamantina to the mansion in a style befitting a young gentlewoman of tender susceptibilities.

But as to what happened thereafter: that will be disclosed in the ensuing chapter.

CHAPTER 18

A brief family reunion is permitted by the
magnanimity of a gracious Emperor
And an Imperial Concubine takes pleasure in the
literary progress of a younger brother

Just at that moment a servant came in to say that the workmen needed some gauze for pasting on window-lattices and asked Xi-feng if she would unlock the storeroom for them. Then another servant arrived and asked her to

take charge of some gold and silver plate. Lady Wang and her maids also seemed to be fully occupied. Thoughtful Bao-chai pointed out to Bao-yu and the rest that they were getting in everyone's way, and at her suggestion they all adjourned to Ying-chun's room.

Lady Wang's busyness in fact continued unabated until well into the tenth month. By then the contractors had fulfilled their contracts and the various buildings in the garden been stocked with appropriate ornaments and antiques; supplies of livestock—storks, deer, rabbits, chicken, geese, and so forth -had been purchased and distributed to the parts of the garden where they were to be reared; Jia Qiang's young ladies had rehearsed and were word-perfect in twenty or thirty operatic pieces; and the little Buddhist and Taoist nuns had mastered the essential parts of their respective liturgies. Jia Zheng could now feel reasonably well satisfied that things were as they should be, and invited Grandmother Jia into the garden for a final inspection in which she was to suggest any last-minute alterations that might still be needed. When not the slightest shadow of an imperfection could any more be found, he at last sent in his written application for a Visitation. The Gracious Reply arrived on the very same day:

> Her Grace will make a Family Visitation next year on the fifteenth of the first month, being the Festival of Lanterns.

The receipt of this reply seemed to throw the Jia family into an even greater frenzy of preparation than before, so that even its New Year celebrations that year were somewhat scamped.

In no time at all the Festival of Lanterns seemed to be almost upon them. On the eighth of the first month a eunuch came from the Palace to inspect the layout of the Separate Residence and to establish where the Imperial Concubine would change her clothes', where she would sit to converse with her family, where she would receive their obeisances, where she would feast them, and where she would retire to when she wanted to rest. The eunuch Chief of Security also arrived with his eunuch minions and supervised a great deal of sealing-up and screening-off everywhere. He also instructed the members of the household in the regulations for leaving and entering, serving food and bringing messages, all of which had to be done through special entrances and exits and by special routes.

Outside the mansion the Chief Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police and a gentleman from the Board of Works were busy supervising the sweeping of the surrounding streets and the chasing away of all idlers, onlookers and other suspicious-looking characters.

Meanwhile Jia She and the consortium were putting up ornamental lanterns everywhere in the gardens and fixing fireworks in place for a pyrotechnic display in honour of the visit. By the fourteenth everything was finally ready. No one in the Jia household, whether master or servant, had a wink of sleep throughout the whole of that night.

By five o'clock next morning, when it was still dark night outside, all those in the family from Grandmother Jia downwards who held any sort of rank or title were already dressed in full court rig. In the Separate Residence

> painted phoenix and coiling dragon
> flapped and fluttered on drapes and curtains,
> gold and silver-work gleamed and glinted,
> jewels and gems made a fiery sparkle,
> subtle incenses smouldered in brazen censers,
> 'everlastings' blossomed in china vases;

—and all was so silent, that throughout the whole of that great garden not the sound of a cough was to be heard.

Jia She and the other menfolk drew themselves up outside the west gate. Grandmother Jia stood outside the main gate with the female members of the family. They noticed that the ends of the street and the entrances of the side-streets leading into it had all been screened off.

Just as they were beginning to grow impatient, a eunuch trotted up on horseback and was stopped and questioned by Jia Zheng

'Oh, you're much too early yet!' said the eunuch. 'Her Grace won't be taking her lunch until one o'clock; then at two she goes to divine service in the Bao-ling chapel. Five o'clock, when she has an appointment to feast with the Emperor in the Da-ming Palace and look at the New Year lanterns, is the first opportunity she will have of asking permission to leave. I should be surprised if she got started much before seven o'clock this evening!'

'Well,' said Xi-feng to Grandmother Jia when she heard this, 'you and Aunt Wang may as well go back to your room. You will be able to come back later on nearer the time.'

Grandmother Jia and the other ladies took her advice and went off, leaving Xi-feng to attend to whatever still needed doing in the garden. Under her direction some of the stewards carried off the eunuchs and treated them to food and wine, while other servants fetched great bundles of wax candles to illuminate the garden's many lanterns with.

Suddenly, as afternoon drew towards evening, a clatter of many hooves was heard, and after a short pause, a group of ten or so eunuchs rushed in out of breath, clapping their hands as they ran. This was taken by the other eunuchs as a sign that the Imperial Concubine was on her way, for they at once jumped up and hurried to their prearranged places. The family, too, took up their positions once more, Jia She and the menfolk outside the west gate and Grandmother Jia with the ladies outside the main entrance.

For a long time there was total silence. Then a couple of eunuchs on horseback came riding very, very slowly up to the west gate. Dismounting, they led their horses out of sight behind the cloth screens, then returned to take up their stand at the sides of the road, half-facing towards the west. After a considerable wait, two more eunuchs arrived and went through the same motions as the first pair. Then another two, and then another, until in all some ten pairs were standing at the sides of the road, their faces turned expectantly towards the west.

Presently a faint sound of music was heard and the Imperial Concubine's procession at last came in sight.

First came several pairs of eunuchs carrying embroidered banners.

Then several more pairs with ceremonial pheasant-feather fans.

Then eunuchs swinging gold-inlaid censers in which special 'palace incense' was burning.

Next came a great gold-coloured 'seven-phoenix' umbrella of state, hanging from its curve-topped shaft like a great drooping bell-flower. In its shadow was borne the Imperial Concubine's travelling wardrobe: her head-dress, robe, sash and shoes.

Eunuch gentlemen-in-waiting followed carrying her rosary, her embroidered handkerchief, her spittoon, her fly-whisk, and various other items.

Last of all, when this army of attendants had gone by, a great gold-topped palanquin with phoenixes embroidered on its **yellow** curtains slowly advanced on the shoulders of eight eunuch bearers.

As Grandmother Jia and the rest dropped to their knees eunuchs rushed up and helped them to get up again. The palanquin passed through the great gate and made for the entrance of a courtyard on the east side of the forecourt. There a eunuch knelt beside it and invited the Imperial Concubine to descend and 'change her clothes'. The bearers carried it through the entrance and set it down just inside the courtyard. The other eunuchs then withdrew, leaving Yuan-chun's ladies-in-waiting to help her from the palanquin.

The courtyard she now stepped out into was brilliant with coloured lanterns of silk gauze cunningly fashioned in all sorts of curious and beautiful shapes and patterns. An illuminated sign hung over the entrance of the principal building:

PILLED WITH FAVOURS BATHED IN BLESSINGS

Yuan-chun passed beneath it into the room that had been prepared for her, then, having 'changed her clothes', came out again and stepped back into the palanquin, which was now borne into the garden.

Her first impression was a confused one of curling drifts of incense smoke and gleaming colours. There were lanterns everywhere, and soft strains of music. She seemed to be entering a little world wholly dedicated to the pursuit of ease and luxury and delight. Looking at it from the depths of her palanquin she shook her head a little sadly and sighed:

'Oh dear, this is all *so* extravagant I'

At that moment a eunuch knelt beside the palanquin and invited the Imperial Concubine to proceed by boat. Stepping Out onto the waiting barge she saw an expanse of clear water curving between its banks like a sportive dragon. Lanterns of crystal and glass were fixed to the balustrades which lined the banks, their silvery radiance giving the white marble, in the semi-darkness, the appearance of gleaming drifts of snow. Because of the season, the willows and apricot trees above them were bare and leafless; but in place of leaves they were festooned with hundreds of tiny lanterns, and flowers of gauze, rice-paper and bast had been fastened to the tips of their branches. Other lanterns made of shells and feathers, in the form of lotuses, water-lilies, ducks and egrets floated on the surface of the water below. It would have been hard to say whether the water below or the banks above presented the more brilliant spectacle. Together they combined to make a fairyland of jewelled light. And to these visual delights were added the many charming miniature gardens on the barge itself—not to mention its pearl blinds, embroidered curtains, and the carved and painted oars and paddle with which it was furnished. While Yuan-chun was still admiring all this, her boat approached a landing-stage in a grotto, above which hung a lantern-sign inscribed with these words:

SMARTWEED BANK AND FLOWERY HARBOUR

Stone's Note to Reader:

You may find it *surprising* that 'Smartweed Bank and Flowery Harbour', The Phoenix Dance' and those other names, which *in* the last chapter we showed Bao-yu inventing in an aptitude test imposed at random by his father, should actually have been used on the occasion of the Imperial Concubine's first visit to her family. Surely, you will say, a household as long established and highly cultivated as the Jias' must have had several well-known talents at its disposal which it could have called upon for such important purposes as these? These were no wealthy parvenus whose vulgarity would be satisfied with the effusions of a gifted schoolboy for filling in the gaps where inscription:

are felt to be *de rigueur.*

The answer lies in Yuan-chun's special relationship with Bao-yu. Before Yuan-chun entered the Palace, she had been brought up mainly by Grandmother Jia; and when Bao-yu appeared on the scene (at a time when his mother was already middle-aged and unlikely to have any more children) she had lavished all her affection on this little brother who spent all his time with her at their grandmother's. When he was still a very little boy of

only three or four and had not yet begun his schooling, she had taught him to recite several texts and to recognize several thousand characters. Although they were brother and sister, their relationship was more like that of a mother and her son; and even after she entered the Palace, she was always writing letters to her father and her male cousins in which she expressed concern for the little boy who was so constantly in her thoughts. 'I beg you to be most careful in your handling of this child,' she once wrote. 'If you are not strict with him, he will never grow up into a proper man. But if you are too strict, you may endanger his health and cause Grandmother to be distressed.'

When, some months previously, Jia Zheng received a favourable report from Bao-yu's schoolmaster in which his creative ability was commended, he had used the visit to the garden as a means of trying him out. The results were not, of course, what a great writer would have produced in similar circumstances, but at least they were not unworthy of the family's literary traditions, and Jia Zheng resolved that his daughter should see them, so that she might know that the progress made by her beloved younger brother fully came up to the measure of those ardent hopes she had so often expressed in her letters.

—Incidentally, Bao-yu had, in the intervening time, supplied many more inscriptions for the places they had been unable to cover on that first occasion.

Stone

When Yuan-chun saw the words 'Smartweed Bank and Flowery Harbour' she laughed.

'Surely "Flowery Harbour" is enough by itself? Why "Smartweed Bank" as well?'

At once an attendant eunuch disembarked and rushed like the wind to tell Jia Zheng, who immediately gave orders to have the inscription changed.

By this time the barge had drawn alongside the bank and Yuan-chun disembarked and stepped once more into her palanquin. Soon she was borne into that part of the garden where 'Roof above roof soared Eye up-compelling ... and saw the white marble memorial arch which had so strongly affected Bao-yu when *he* first saw it. It now bore a temporary inscription:

PRECINCT OF THE CELESTIAL VISITANT

Yuan-chun gave orders that the words 'The House of Reunion' should be substituted.

She now ascended the terraces and entered the open-fronted hall of audience.

From a ring of cressets against the night sky
a fragrant scatter dropped on the flagstones;
and candelabra like fiery fir-trees
gleamed festively in the gilded casements;
there were blinds looped and fringed like a prawn's belly,
there were rugs in rows like an otter's offering;
and tripods smoked with perfumes of musk and borneol,
and behind the throne waved fans of pheasant feathers.

It was a scene no whit less splendid than that fairy palace of which the poet sings:

The abode of the Princess has cassia halls and orchid chambers.

‘How is it that this place has no name?’ asked Yuan-chun.

‘This is the principal hall of the Residence, Your Grace. The family dared not give it a name without consulting you first.

Her Grace nodded.

A eunuch Master of Ceremonies now requested her to seat herself upon a chair of state in order to receive the obeisances of her family. Music struck up from a band stationed at either side of the steps as two eunuchs conducted Jia She and Jia Zheng onto the terrace beneath. The other male members of the family ranged themselves behind them and the whole party then began to advance in formation up the steps into the hall.

‘Excused!’

A lady-in-waiting came forward and uttered this single word as an indication that the Imperial Concubine wished to absolve them from the ceremonial, and with a slight bow they withdrew.

It was now the turn of Grandmother Jia (‘the Dowager Lady Jia of Rong-guo’ they called her) and the ladies of the household to make their obeisance. The eunuchs led them up the steps at the east side of the terrace on to the platform in front of the hall, where they ranged themselves in order of precedence.

Once more the lady-in-waiting pronounced the absolving word and they, too, withdrew.

After tea had been offered three times as etiquette prescribed, the Imperial Concubine descended from her throne, the music stopped, and she withdrew into a side room to ‘change her clothes’. A less formal carriage than the imperial palanquin had been prepared which carried her from the garden to her family’s own quarters.

Inside Grandmother Jia’s apartment Yuan-chun became a grandchild once more and knelt down to make her kotow. But Grandmother Jia and the rest knelt down too and prevented her from prostrating herself. She ended up, clinging to Grandmother Jia by one hand and Lady Wang by the other, while the tears streamed down her face, too overcome to say anything. All three of them, in fact, though there was so much they wanted to say, seemed quite incapable of speech and stood there holding each other and sobbing, apparently unable to stop. The others present— Lady Xing, Li Wan, Wang Xi-feng, Ying-chun, Tan-chun and Xi-chun—stood round them weeping silently. No one spoke a word.

Yuan-chun at last restrained her sobs and forced a smile to her tear-stained face:

‘It hasn’t been easy, winning this chance of coming back among you after all those years since I was first walled up in That Place. Now that we are seeing each other at last, we ought to talk and be cheerful, not waste all the time crying! I shall be leaving again in no time at all, and Heaven only knows when I shall have another chance of seeing you!’

At this point she broke down once more and had to be comforted by Lady Xing. When she had composed herself, Grandmother Jia made her sit down while the members of the family came forward one at a time to greet her and say a few words. This was an occasion for further tears. Then the senior menservants of both the Rong-guo and Ning-guo mansions assembled in the courtyard outside and paid their respects. They were followed by the women servants and maids, who were allowed to come inside the room to make their kotow.

Yuan-chun asked why her Aunt Xue and her cousins Bao-chai and Lin Dai-yu were missing.

‘Relations outside the Jia family are not allowed to see you without a special invitation, dear,’ Lady Wang told her.

Yuan-chun asked them to be invited in immediately, and Aunt Xue and the two girls arrived after a few moments. They would have kotowed to her in accordance with court etiquette had not Yuan-chun hurriedly excused them from doing so. The three of them went up to her, and niece and aunt exchanged news of the years that had elapsed since they last met.

Next Lutany and the other maids who had accompanied Yuan-chun into the Palace came forward to make their kotows to Grandmother Jia. The old lady at once motioned to them to rise and gave instructions to her own servants to entertain them in another room.

The senior eunuchs and the ladies4n-waiting were now led off by members of the staffs of Jia She's household and the Ning-guo mansion to be entertained elsewhere, leaving only three or four very junior eunuchs in attendance. Yuan-chun was at last free to chat informally with her mother and the other female members of her family and learned for the first time about many personal and domestic events that had occurred in the household since she left it.

Then there was her interview with Jia Zheng, which had to take place with her father standing outside the door-curtain of the room in which she was sitting. Now that she was the Emperor's woman, this was the nearest to her he could ever hope to get. The sense of deprivation struck home to Yuan-chun as she addressed him through the curtain.

'What is the use of all this luxury and splendour,' she said bitterly, 'if I am to be always separated from those I love—denied the tenderness which even the poorest peasant who seasons his bread with salt and pickles and dresses in hempen homespun is free to enjoy?'

With tears in his eyes the good man delivered the following little speech to the daughter he could not see: 'Madam.

> That a poor and undistinguished household such as ours should have produced, as it were, a phoenix from amidst a flock of crows and pies to bask in the sunshine of Imperial favour and shed its reflected beams on the departed representatives of our ancestral line must be attributable to the concentration in your single person of the quintessences of all that is most admirable in celestial and terrestrial nature and the accumulated merit of many generations of our forebears, and is an honour and a blessing in which my wife and I are proud to be participators.

'Our beloved Emperor, who embodies in his own Sacred Person those life-giving forces which are always invisibly at work in the natural cosmos, has showered down upon his grateful subjects a gracious kindness unprecedented in the annals of recorded history—a kindness which even the expenditure of our life's blood to the veriest ultimate drop would be wholly inadequate to repay and which only the most unremitting pains and unswerving loyalty in the discharge of those duties to which it has pleased him to call us could adequately express.

'It is our earnest prayer that His Sacred Majesty may continue long to reign over us, a blessing to all his peoples; and that Your Grace should feel no anxiety concerning the welfare of my wife and myself during our now declining years, but should rather cherish and sustain your own precious person, in order to be the better able to serve His Sacred Majesty with care and diligence, seeking by that service to be worthy of the tender regard and loving favour which he has been graciously pleased to bestow upon you.'

To this formal speech the Imperial Concubine made a formal reply:

'Sir. It is of course desirable that you should exercise the utmost diligence when engaged upon business of state, but it is to be hoped that you will take sufficient care of your own well-being whenever not so engaged, and will under no circumstances vex yourself with anxiety on our behalf.'

'The inscriptions at present displayed on the pavilions and other buildings in the garden were composed by Bao-yu,' said Jia Zheng. 'If there are any places in the garden which particularly take your fancy, we hope you will name them for

us.'

The news that Bao-yu could already compose inscriptions evoked a smile of pleasure.

'He has made progress, then!'

Jia Zheng withdrew.

'But why is Bao-yu not with us?' she added.

'The menfolk of the family are not supposed to see you without special reason,' Grandmother Jia explained.

Yuan-hun at once gave orders that he should be summoned, and presently he was brought in by one of the little eunuchs. When he had completed his kotow she called him over, and stretching Out her arms, drew him to her bosom where she held him in a close embrace, stroking his hair and fondling the back of his neck.

'What a lot you have grown-!' she began. But the rest was drowned in a flood of tears.

You-shi and Xi-feng now approached to announce that a feast awaited her in the Separate Residence. Yuan-chun rose to her feet, and bidding Bao-yu lead the way, walked with the rest of the company to the gate of the garden. There, in the light of the innumerable lanterns, all kinds of spectacles had been prepared for her entertainment. The route led through 'The Phoenix Dance', 'Fragrant **Red** and Lucent **Green'**, 'The Hopeful Sign', and 'The Garden of Spices'. This time the inspection was no perfunctory one. Yuan-chun insisted on looking inside the buildings and climbing up and down their stairs. She crossed bridges, she walked round each tiny 'mountain', and every once in a while she stopped to look about her and admire the view. All the places she visited were so beautifully furnished and so ingeniously planned, that she could not conceal her delight. But there was a faint note of censure in her praise

'You really mustn't be so extravagant in future. This is *far* too much!'

They had now come to the main hall. Having first decreed that they should dispense with court etiquette—which would have prevented the older ladies from sitting down at all—she took her place at the main table, while Grandmother Jia and the rest sat at little tables on either side, and You-shi, Li Wan and Xi-feng moved to and fro, dispensing wine and helping with the service.

While they were still drinking, Yuan-chun sent for writing materials, and taking up a brush, began in her own hand to write out some names for the parts of the garden she had liked the best. The name she chose for the garden as a whole was 'Prospect Garden', and she composed the following couplet to go outside the main reception hall:

For all earth to share, his great compassion has been extended, that children and humble folk may gratefully rejoice.

For all ages to admire, his noble institutions have been promoted, that people of every land and clime may joyfully exult.

She altered 'The Phoenix Dance' to 'The Naiad's House', and she renamed 'Fragrant **Red** and Lucent **Green'** '**Crimson** Joys and **Green** Delights' and named the building in its grounds 'The House of **Green** Delights'. The buildings belonging to 'The Garden of Spices' she named 'All-spice Court'. Those of 'The Hopeful Sign' she gave the name 'Washbrook Farm'. The main hall became 'Prospect Hall' with separate names for the high galleries on either side: 'The Painted Chamber' for the one on the east side, 'The Fragrance Gallery' for the one on the west. Among the other names which she invented for various other parts of the garden were:

'The Smartweed Loggia', 'The Lotus Pavilion', 'Amaryllis Eyot', and 'Duckweed Island'. She also composed inscriptions for some of its prospects, including 'Pear-tree blossom in springtime rain', 'Paulownia leaves in autumn wind', and 'Rushes in the winter snow'. The couplets composed by Bao-yu were to remain

unaltered.

Having finished with the inscriptions, she proceeded to write out the following quatrain of her own composition:

Embracing hills and streams, with skill they wrought:
Their work at last is to perfection brought.
Earth's fairest prospects all are here installed,
So 'Prospect Garden' let its name be called!

'There!' she said with a smile to the girls. 'I'm no genius, as you all well know, and I have never been much of a poet. But tonight I thought I really must write *something*, for this beautiful garden's sake. Later on, when I have more time to spare, I intend to write a *Description of Prospect Garden* and a set of verses to be entitled *The Visitation* in commemoration of this wonderful night. But meanwhile I should like each of you girls to compose an inscription that could be used somewhere in the garden, and also a poem to go with it. Just write any-thing that comes into your heads. I don't want you to restrict yourselves by trying to make your poems in any way relate to my own poor effort. As for Bao-yu: I am *very* pleased that he is able to compose verses so well, and I want him to write me an octet for each of the four places in the garden I like best: the Naiad's House, All-spice Court - those are my two favourites—the House of **Green** Delights, and Washbrook Farm. The couplets he has already written for them are very good, but these are four such special places, that I feel they deserve to have something more written about them. And apart from that, if Bao-yu can show me these four poems while I am here, I shall feel that the efforts I made at teaching *him* when he was a little boy were worth while.'

Bao-yu could scarcely refuse, and went off to rack his brains for some good lines.

Tan-chun was by far the most gifted of the Three Springs and joined Bao-chai and Dai-yu in writing octets. Li Wan', Ying-chun and Xi-chun, none of whom had any talent for versification, contented themselves with a quatrain apiece, but found even four lines a considerable effort.

When the girls had all finished, Yuan-chun took up the papers one by one and examined the results of their labours. Here is what they had written:

Ying-chun: *Heart's Ease*

The garden finished, all its prospects please.
Bidden to write, I name this spot 'Heart's Ease'.
Who would have thought on earth such scenes to find
As here refresh the heart and ease the mind?

*

Tan-chun: *Brightness and Grace*

Water on hills and hills on waters smile,
More bright and graceful than the Immortal Isle.
Midst odorous herbs the singer's **green** fan hides;

Her **crimson** skirt through falling petals glides.
A radiant jewel to the world is shown,
A fairy princess from her tower come down:
And since her steps the garden's walks have trod,
No mortal foot must desecrate its sod.

*

Xi-chun: *Art the Creator*

The garden's landscape far and wide outspreads;
High in the clouds its buildings raise their heads;
Serene in moonlight, radiant in the sun—
Great Nature's handiwork has been outdone!

*

Li Wan: *All Things Bright and Beautiful*

The finished garden is a wondrous sight.
Unlettered and unskilled, I blush to write.
Its marvels are not in one phrase expressed,
Yet 'Bright and Beautiful' I judge the best.

*

Xue Bao-chai: *Auspicious Skies*

West of imperial walls the garden lies;
The sun beams on it from auspicious skies.
Its willows orioles from the vale invite;
Tall bamboos tempt the phoenix to alight.
Poetic arts this night must celebrate
Filial affection dressed in robes of state.
Dare I, who have those jewelled phrases read,
Add more to what She has already said?

*

Lin Dai-yu: *The Fairy Stream*

To fairy haunts far from the world's annoy
A royal visit brings a double joy.
A thousand borrowed beauties here combined
In this new setting new enchantment find.
Its odours sweet a poet's wine enrich;
Its flowers a queenly visitor bewitch.
May she and we this favour hope to gain:
That oft-times she may pass this way again!

*

As soon as she had finished reading the poems, Yuan-chun praised them all warmly. 'But Cousin Lin's and Cousin Xue's poems are *specially* good,' she said. 'Our *Jia* girls are no match for them!'

Dai-yu had confidently expected that this night would give her an opportunity of deploying her talents to the full and amazing everyone with her genius. It was very disappointing that no more had been required of her than a single little poem and an inscription; and though she was obliged to confine herself to what the Imperial Concubine had commanded, she had composed her octet without enthusiasm and in very perfunctory manner.

Meanwhile Bao-yu was far from finished with *his* consignment. He had finished composing the poems for the Naiad's House and All-spice Court and was still in the middle of a poem on the House of **Green** Delights. Bao-chai took a peep over his shoulder and noticed that his draft contained the line

Some wear sheathed skirts of lucent **green** curled tight.

When no one was looking she gave him a nudge:

'You can tell Her Grace didn't like "lucent **green**" because she only lust now altered it to something else in your inscription. If you insist on using it in your poem, it will look as if you are deliberately flaunting your difference of opinion. There are so many allusions to plantain leaves you could use, you shouldn't have much difficulty in substituting something else.'

'It's all very well for you to talk,' said Bao-yu, mopping the perspiration from his brow, 'but at this particular moment I can't think of *any* allusion that would do.'

'Why don't you put "in spring **green** waxen sheaths" in place of your "sheathed skirts of lucent **green**"?'

'Where do you get "**green** waxen" from?' said Bao-yu.

'Tut, tut, tut!' Bao-chai shook her head pityingly. 'If this is what you are like tonight, Heaven knows what you'll be like in a few years' time when you come to take the Palace Examination. Probably you'll find you have forgotten even the *Child's First Primer of Rhyming Names*. It's from the Tang poet Qian Xu's poem "Furled Plantains":

Green waxen candles from which no flames rise.

Do you mean to say you've forgotten *that?'* The scales fell from Bao-yu's eyes.

'Good gracious, how *stupid* of me! The words are there ready-made and I didn't think of them! I shall have to call you my "One Word Teacher", like the poet in the story! I shan't be able to treat you like a sister any more,

I shall have to say "sir" when I speak to you I'

'Sister!' said Bao-chai with a little laugh. 'Stop fooling about and get on with your poem! That's your *sister*, sitting up there in the golden robe. *I'm* no sister of yours!'

Fearing that he would waste more time if she stayed, she slipped quietly away.

The poem finished, Bao-yu had now completed three out of the four commanded. At this point Dai-yu, who was still full of dissatisfaction because her talent had been underemployed, noticed that Bao-yu was struggling and came over to the table at which he was working. Observing that 'The Hopeful Sign' still remained to be done, she told him to get on with the copying Out in fair of the three poems he had already completed while she thought of something for 'The Hopeful Sign'. When she had completed a poem in her head, she scribbled it out on a piece of paper, screwed it into a little ball, and tossed it in front of him. Bao-yu smoothed it Out On the table and read it through. It seemed to him to be ten times better than the ones he had written himself. He copied it out in neat *kai-shu* after the other three and handed the finished task to Yuan-chun for her inspection.

This is what she read:

The Phoenix Dance

Perfected now at last, this place is fit
For Bird of Paradise to enter it.
Bach graceful wand lets fall a dewy tear;
Each glossy leaf breathes coolness on the air.
Through narrow-parted blocks the pent stream leaps;
Through chinks of blind the incense thinly seeps.
Let none the checkered shade with violence rude
Disrupting, on the slumberer's dreams intrude!

*

The Garden of Spices

Fragrance of flower-drifts in these quiet confines
Mingles with headier scents of eglantines,
And summer's herbs in a soft, spicy bed
Their aromatic perfumes subtly spread.
Light mist half screens the winding walks from view,
Where chilly verdure soaks the clothes with dew.
Here, slumbering quietly at the fountain's side,
The dreaming poet all day long may bide.

*

*The House of **Green** Delight*

In this quiet plot, where peace reigns through the year,

Bewitching ladies rank on rank appear:
Some wear in spring **green** waxen sheaths curled tight,
Some carmine caps, that are not doffed at night.
Some from the trellis trail their **purple** sleeves,
Some lean on rocks, where thin mists cool their leaves.
Their Mistress, standing in the soft summer breeze,
Finds quiet content in everything she sees.

*

The Hopeful Sign

An inn-sign, through the orchards half-discerned,
Promises shelter and a drink well-earned.
Through water-weeds the pond's geese make their way;
Midst elms and mulberry-trees the swallows play.
The garden's chives are ready to prepare;
The scent of young rice perfumes all the air.
When want is banished, as in times like these,
The spinner and the ploughman take their ease.

Yuan-chun was genuinely delighted.

'You really *have* made progress I' she said. She singled out 'The Hopeful Sign' as the best of the four and changed the name 'Washbrook Farm' back to 'Sweet-rice Village' by way of acknowledgement. She made Tan-chun copy all ten poems - Bao-yu's and the girls' - on to a sheet of fancy paper and sent a eunuch to show it to the gentlemen outside. Jia Zheng and the others were very complimentary, and Jia Zheng presented a eulogy of his own composition entitled *The Visitation*. Yuan-chun also ordered Bao-yu and Jia Lan to be given presents of junket and mince, both of some special kind only made in the Imperial kitchens. At this period Jia Lan was still only a very little boy and did not really know what was going on. He was taken by his mother Li Wan into Yuan-chun's presence and stood beside his uncle Bao-yu to make his little bow of thanks.

All this time Jia Qiang and his troupe of girl players had been waiting impatiently below for an order to begin their performance. Just as they were reaching a peak of impatience, a eunuch came running down to them.

'They've finished writing poems,' he said. 'Quick, give me a play-bill!'

Jia Qiang hurriedly handed him a list of the pieces they had rehearsed, together with a brochure containing the stage names of each of the twelve players and some notes on the parts which each of them played. Four pieces were chosen: 'Shi-fi'n Entertains' from *The Handful of Snow,* 'The Double Seventh' from *The Palace of Eternal Youth,* 'The Meeting of the Immortals' from *The Han-dan Road* and Li-niang's death-scene from *The Return of the Soul*. Jia Qiang supervised the preparations, and soon the rock-splitting little voices and spell-binding movements of the actresses had taken over, and the stage was full of passions which were no whit less overwhelming for being counterfeit.

No sooner had they finished than a eunuch came round, bearing a variety of fancy cakes and sweetmeats on a gilded salver.

‘Which is “Charmante”?’ he asked, referring to the stage name of the little soubrette who had played the part of Liraang’s maid in *The Return of the Soul* and a dashing young huntsman in the ‘play within a play’ *in The Handful of Snow.*

Jia Qiang realized that the confectionery was a present for the little actress, and taking the salver from the eunuch, made Mademoiselle Charmante come forward and kotow her thanks.

‘Her Grace says that she enjoyed Mademoiselle Charmante’s performance the most and would like to see her in two more pieces,’ said the eunuch. ‘She may choose any two she likes.’

Having replied to the eunuch, Jia Qiang told Charmante that she ought to play two more pieces from *The Return of the Soul:* ‘The Walk in the Garden’ and ‘The Dream’. But neither had a part suitable for a soubrette in it, and Charmante obdurately refused. She said she would do ‘The Assignation’ and ‘The Altercation’ from *The Bracelet and the Comb,* in which the part of the pert young maidservant would allow her comic talent a fuller scope. Jia Qiang failed to talk her out of this decision and had to let her do as she wished. Yuan-chun was delighted, and gave special instructions that Charmante was to be well treated and to have the best possible training. She also awarded her, over and above her share of the presents that the whole troupe would receive in commemoration of her visit, two dress-lengths of tribute satin, two embroidered purses, and some miniature gold and silver ingots.

The feast was now cleared away and Yuan-chun recommenced her tour of the garden, visiting those places which she had not had time to look at before dinner. When they came to the little convent nestling under its hill, she washed her hands and entered the shrine-hall to offer incense and pray before the image of the Buddha. She also wrote an inscription for the board which hung above the image:

THE SHIP OF MERCY ON THE SEA OF SUFFERING

and gave instructions for various extra presents to be bestowed on the little nuns in addition to those which, along with all the other members of the household, they were already due to receive in commemoration of her visit.

A list for the latter had already been drawn up and presently it was submitted to Yuan-chun by a kneeling eunuch for her approval. After reading through it in silence she approved its contents and asked that they should be distributed forthwith. The presents distributed were as follows:

To Grandmother Jia:
one golden ru-yi sceptre
one jade ditto
a staff of carved aloeswood
a rosary of putchuk beads
four lengths of ‘Fu Gui Chang Chun’ tribute satin
four lengths of ‘Fu Shou Mian Chang’ tribute silk
ten medallions of **red** gold with a design showing an ingot, a writing-brush and a sceptre (which in the riddling rebus-language used by the makers of such objects meant ‘All your heart’s desire’)

ten silver medallions with a design showing a stone-
chime flanked by a pair of little fish (carrying the
rebus-message ‘Blessings in abundance’)

Lady Xing, Lady Wang and Aunt Xue each received the same selection of gifts as randmother Jia with the omission of the sceptres, staff and rosary.

To Jia Jing, Jia She and Jia Zheng (each):

two new books of His Imperial Majesty’s own composition
two boxes of ink-sticks (collector’s pieces)
one solid gold wine-cup
one solid silver ditto
silks and satins as above.

To Bao-yu, Dai-yu, Ying-chun, Tan-chun and Xi-chun (each):

one new book
one inkstone (collector’s piece)
two specially designed medallions in gold
two ditto in silver

To Bao-yu and Jia Lan (each):

one gold necklet
one silver ditto
two gold medallions
two silver ditto

To You-shi, Li Wan and Xi-feng (each):

two gold medallions
two silver ditto
four dress-lengths of tribute silk

(Also twenty-four lengths of silk and one hundred strings of unmixed Imperial Mint copper cash for the women-Servants and maids in attendance on Grandmother Jia, Lady Wang and the girls)

To Cousin Zhen, Jia Lian, Jia Huan and Jia Rong (each):

one length of tribute satin
one gold medallion
one silver ditto

There were also a hundred bales of variegated satins, a thousand taels of silver and an unspecified number of bottles of Palace wine for the senior servants of the Rong and Ning Mansions and Separate Residence responsible for construction and maintenance, attendance, theatre management, and lighting, and an additional five hundred strings of unmixed Imperial Mint copper cash for the cooks, entertainers and Miscellaneous.

When all had expressed their thanks, one of the eunuchs in charge announced that it was a quarter to three

and time for Her Grace to return to the Palace. At once Yuan-chun's eyes filled with tears, and even though she forced herself to smile, she was unable to prevent a few drops from falling. Clinging to Grandmother Jia and Lady Wang as if she would never let them go, she begged them again and again not to grieve for her.

'Now you mustn't worry about me, my dears: just look after yourselves! Thanks to the Emperor's kindness, we are now allowed visits in the Palace once a month: so you see we can see each other quite easily. It is silly of us to be so upset! And if His Majesty is gracious enough to permit another Visitation next year you really mustn't be so extravagant again on my account!'

Grandmother Jia and the others were now sobbing audibly and were much too overcome to reply. But Yuan-chun, however hard it was to leave her family, dared not infringe the regulations of the Imperial Household, and steeled herself to re-enter the palanquin which was to carry her away. It was all the rest of the family could do to restrain Grandmother Jia from making a scene, and when she was somewhat calmed, she and Lady Wang had to be led weeping from the garden in a state of near-collapse.

What followed will be told in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 19

A very earnest young woman offers
counsel by night
And a very endearing one is found to
be a source of fragrance by day

On the day following the Imperial Concubine's return to the Palace, she called on the Emperor to offer thanks and gave him a full account of her Visitation. The Emperor was visibly pleased by her report and commanded that bounties of gold, silver and silks should be issued to Jia Zheng and the other fathers of visiting ladies by the Inner Treasury.

But there is no need for us to pursue these matters in further detail.

*

The events of the last few days had taxed the energies of all the inmates of the Ning-guo and Rong-guo mansions to the utmost, and by now all of them were feeling both physically and mentally exhausted. Even so, Xi-feng forced herself to 8upervise the taking down and storing away of all the decorations and other movables from the garden—an operation which took another two or three days to accomplish.

Xi-feng's duties and responsibilities were so many that she could not evade them and seek recuperation in rest and quiet as the others did. At the same time, however, the anxiety to be thought well of and the shrinking fear of criticism that were a part of her nature made her take pains, even when she was at her busiest, to appear outwardly as idle and unoccupied as the rest.

Of those idle and unoccupied rest, the idlest and most unoccupied was Bao-yu. On this particular morning, Aroma's mother had been round first thing to report to Grandmother Jia that she was taking her daughter home for a New Year's party and would not be bringing her back until late that evening. After her departure Bao-yu played 'Racing Go' with the other maids. This was a game in which you moved your Go-piece across the board in accordance with the throw of dice, the object being to reach the opposite side before everyone else and pocket

all the stakes.

He was already tired of sitting indoors and was beginning to find the game boring, when one of the maids told him that someone had just been round from Cousin Zhen's inviting him over to the other house to see their New Year lanterns and to join them in watching some plays. Bao-yu told the maids to fetch his going-out clothes and help him change. As he was on the point of leaving, someone arrived with a present of sweetened koumiss from the Imperial Concubine. He remembered how much Aroma had enjoyed this drink last time they had had some, and asked them to put it by for her. Then, having first called on Grandmother Jia to tell her he was leaving, he went over to the other house to watch the players.

The plays they were performing turned out to be very noisy ones: *Ding-lang Finds His Father*, *Huang Bo-yang and the Ghostly Army*, *Monkey Makes War in Heaven* and *The Investiture of the Gods.* All of them, but especially the last two, seemed to involve much rushing in and out of supernatural beings, and the sound of drums and cymbals and blood-curdling battle-cries, as they whirled into combat across the stage with banners flying and weapons flashing or invoked the names of the Buddha with waving of burning joss-sticks, was positively deafening. It carried into the street outside, where the passers-by smiled appreciatively and told each other that only a family like the Jias could afford theatricals that produced so satisfying a volume of noise.

To Bao-yu, however, a little of this kind of thing was more than enough, and after sitting for a short while with the rest, he drifted off to seek his amusement elsewhere. To begin with he went inside and spent some time in bantering conversation with You-shi and the maids and concubines in the women's quarters. When he went off once more through the inner gate, the women assumed that he was going back to the play and made no attempt to detain him. The menfolk —Cousin Zhen, Jia Lian, Xue Pan and the rest—were engrossed in games of. guess-fingers and other convivial aids to drunkenness, and if they noticed his absence at all, assumed that he was inside with the ladies and did not comment on it.

As for the pages who had accompanied him: the older ones, estimating that he had almost certainly come over for the day, gave themselves time off to gamble and drink with their cronies Of to visit friends and relations outside, confident that if they returned in the evening they would be in time for Bao-yu's departure. The younger ones wormed their way into the **green**-room to watch the excitement and get in the way of the actors. Bao-yu was left without a single one of them in attendance.

Finding himself alone, he began thinking about a certain painting he remembered having seen in Cousin Zhen's 'smaller study'. It was a very life-like portrait of a beautiful woman. While everyone was celebrating, he reflected, she was sure to have been left on her own and would perhaps be feeling lonely. He would go and have a look at her and cheer her up.

But as he approached the study, he experienced a sudden thrill of fright. A gentle moaning could be heard coming from inside it.

'Good gracious!' he thought. 'Can the woman in the painting really have come to life?'

He made a tiny hole in the paper window with his tongue and peeped through. It was no painted lady he saw, stepped down from her hanging scroll upon the wall, but Tealeaf, pressed upon the body of a girl and evidently engaged in those exercises in which Bao-yu had once been instructed by the firry Disenchantment.

'Good lord!'

He cried out involuntarily, and kicking open the door, strode into the study, so startling the two inside that they shook in their clothes. Seeing that it was Bao-yu, Tealeaf at once fell upon his knees and begged for mercy.

'In broad daylight!' said Bao-yu. 'What do you think you're at? If Mr Zhen got to hear of this, it would be more than your life is worth.'

As he spoke, his eye fell upon the girl. She had a soft, white skin, to whose charms he could not be insensible. At the moment she was **red** to the very tips of her ears and stood there in silence, hanging her head with shame. Bao-yu stamped his foot impatiently:

'Why don't you go?'

The words seemed to bring her to herself, for she turned and fled immediately. Bao-yu ran after her, shouting.
'Don't be afraid! I won't tell anyone!'
Tealeaf, running out behind him, was frantic:
'My dear little grandfather, that's exactly what you are doing!'
'How old is she?' Bao-yu asked him.
'Not more than fifteen or so,' said Tealeaf.
'You don't even know her age!' said Bao-yu. 'You can do *this* to her without even knowing her age! She's wasted on you, that's evident. Poor girl! What's her name?'
'Ah *now*, that's quite a story,' said Tealeaf with a broad smile. 'She says that just before she was born her mother dreamed she saw a beautiful piece of brocade, woven in all the colours of the rainbow, with a pattern of lucky swastikas all over it. So when she was born, she gave her the name "Swastika".'
Bao-yu smiled back.
'She ought to have a lucky future ahead of her, then. Shall I ask them tomorrow if you can have her for your wife?'
Tealeaf thought this was a huge joke.
'Why aren't you watching the plays, Master Bao?' he asked. 'They're ever so good!'
'I did watch for quite a while,' said Bao-yu, 'but I got rather deafened and came out to walk around for a bit. That's how I found you here. But what are we going to do now?'
Tealeaf gave a sly little smile:
'What about going for a ride outside the city? If we slipped off quietly we could get there and back without anyone knowing.'
'Too risky,' said Bao-yu. 'We might get kidnapped or something. Besides, there would be terrible trouble if they found out. It'd better be somewhere nearer, so that we can get back quickly.'
'Who do we know near here that we could call on?' said Tealeaf. 'I can't think of anyone.'
'I know,' said Bao-yu. 'Why don't we go round to the Huas' house and see what Aroma is up to?'
'All right. But I've forgotten where they live,' said Tealeaf untruthfully. 'And suppose they *do* find out you've been gadding around outside' (he added the real reason for his hesitation) 'they'll say I put you up to it, and I shall get a beating.'
'I'll see you don't get into trouble,' said Bao-yu.
Reassured, Tealeaf fetched the horse, and the two of them slipped out by the back entrance.
Luckily the Huas' house was only a few hundred yards from the Ning-guo mansion, and in no time at all they had reached its gate. Tealeaf entered first and called out the name of Aroma's elder brother, Hua Zi-fang.
Aroma's mother was not long back from collecting the various nieces, on both her own and her late husband's side of the family, who had had to be fetched after she had been to call for Aroma, and the family had only just settled down to their tea when they heard this voice outside calling for Hua Zi-fang. To the latter's considerable surprise and mystification he found, on going outside to look, his sister's young master waiting at the gate with a servant. Having first lifted Bao-yu off his horse, he went back into the courtyard and bawled to the rest inside:
'It's Master Bao!'
Aroma was dumbfounded and came running out to discover the cause of this unaccountable visit. As soon as she saw him she clung to him anxiously:
'What is it? Are you all right?'
Bao-yu laughed carelessly.
'I was just feeling bored, so I came over to see what you were up to.'
'Stupid!' said Aroma, relieved to find that nothing was amiss. 'What did you *think* I would be up to?'
She turned to Tealeaf.
'Who else is with you?'

‘Nobody,’ said Tealeaf with a grin. ‘Nobody else knows we’re here.’

At this Aroma became alarmed once more.

‘That’s terrible! Suppose you were to run into someone? Suppose you were to meet the *Master?’* She glanced at Bao-yu fearfully. ‘In any case, the streets are so crowded now, you could easily get ridden down or something. It would be no joke if you were to have an accident. You two certainly have a nerve I’ She turned to Tealeaf again. ‘You put him up to this, didn’t you? Wait till I get back: I’ll tell his nannies about you. They’ll have you flogged like a felon, see if they don’t!’

Tealeaf pulled a face.

‘Don’t go trying to pin the blame on me! Master Bao was cursing and swearing at me to make me go with him. *I* kept telling him not to come. Anyway, we’d better be going back now, if that’s the way you feel!’

‘You might as well stay, now you’re here,’ said Hua Zi-fang in a conciliatory manner. ‘There’s no point in quarrelling about it. The only trouble is, this is not much of a place we live in here: poor and cramped and not too clean and that. Hardly a fit place for the likes of Master Bao, I’m thinking.’

By this time Aroma’s mother had joined them outside to welcome the visitors. Aroma took Bao-yu by the hand and led him in. He saw four or five girls sitting down inside who hung their heads and blushed when he entered. Despite their blushes, Hua Zi-fang and his mother insisted that Bao-yu should get up on the kang with them, as they were afraid that he would find their house cold. Having installed him on the kang, they bustled to and fro fetching things to eat and pouring tea.

‘Now don’t you two rush about, Mother,’ said Aroma. *‘I* know how to look after him. There’s no point in your giving him a lot of things he won’t be able to eat.’

As she said this she took her own cushion that she had been sitting on, put it on top of a little short-legged kang table, and made Bao-yu sit on it with his feet on her metal foot-warmer. Then she took a couple of rose-shaped perfume lozenges from a little purse she was wearing, opened up her hand-warmer, popped the lozenges onto the burning charcoal, and closing it up again, stuffed it into the front of his gown. Having at last got him settled comfortably and to her own satisfaction, she served him with tea which she poured out for him into her own cup.

Hua Zi-fang and his mother had by now finished laying an elaborate tea. The cakes, nuts and dried fruits were arranged on their plates, and the plates themselves on the table, with painstaking attention to symmetry and design. Aroma could tell at a glance that there was nothing there which Bao-yu could possibly be expected to eat. But her family must not be offended.

‘Since you’ve decided to come,’ she said to Bao-yu with a smile. ‘we can’t let you go without having tasted *something* of ours. You’ll have to try *something*, lust to be able to say that you have been our guest!’

She took a handful of pine nuts from one of the dishes on the table, and blowing away the skins, handed them to him on her handkerchief.

Bao-yu noticed that Aroma’s eyes were slightly **red** and that there were recent tear-stains on her powdered cheeks.

‘Why have you been crying?’ He spoke the words in an undertone as she handed him the pine nuts.

‘Who’s been crying?’ said Aroma with a feigned laugh. ‘I’ve lust been rubbing my eyes.’

Her little fiction was successful, for he made no further comment.

Bao-yu was wearing his dark-red gown with the pattern of golden dragons and white fox-fur lining, and a sable-lined slate-**blue** jacket with fringed edges.

‘Fancy!’ said Aroma, ‘you got yourself all dressed up lust to come and see *us.* Didn’t anyone ask you where you were going?’

‘No,’ said Bao-yu. ‘Actually I changed because I was going to Cousin Zhen’s. He invited me over to watch the players.’

Aroma nodded.

‘You’d better go back after you’ve sat a bit longer,’ she said. ‘This is really no place for you here.’

'You shouldn't be too long, either,' said Bao-yu with a smile. 'I've got something nice waiting for you when you get back.'

'Sh!' said Aroma. 'Do you want them all to hear you?'

As she said this, she reached out and took the Magic Jade from his neck.

'Here's something that will interest you all,' she said, holding it out to the others. 'You know how often you've spoken about that wonderful lade of Master Bao's and said how much you'd give for a look at it? Well, here it is! Now you can look to your heart's content. There you are, that's all it is! Not so wonderful, really, is it?'

They passed it from hand to hand, and when it had gone full circle and all had examined it, she hung it once more round his neck.

Aroma told her elder brother to go out and hire the cleanest, smartest4ooking cab he could find to take Bao-yu home in.

'I can see him safely back,' said Hua Zi-fang. 'He won't come to any harm on horseback.'

'It's not a question of whether he'll come to any harm or not,' said Aroma 'I'm afraid someone might see him.'

Hua Zi-fang hurried out to hire a cab. The rest of the company, realizing that Bao-yu had no real business to be there, made no effort to detain him and rose to see him off. Aroma snatched up a handful of sweetmeats for Tealeaf. She also gave him a few coppers to buy fireworks with.

'Mind you don't tell anyone about this visit!' she said. 'You'll be in trouble yourself if they find out about it.

She escorted Bao-yu to the gate and saw him into the cab, pulling the blind down on him as soon as he was inside. Tealeaf and her brother followed behind it with the horse. When they arrived outside the Ning-guo mansion, Tealeaf told the cabbie to stop.

'We'd better go in here for a bit before going home,' he explained to Aroma's brother. 'Otherwise they might get suspicious.'

Hua Zi-fang acknowledged the sense of this precaution, and lifting Bao-yu from the cab, helped him up on to his horse.

'Thank you for your trouble,' said Bao-yu with a winning smile as he rode into the rear gate of the Ning-guo mansion.

And there, for the time being, we shall leave him.

*

When Bao-yu left his room for the other mansion, his maids were free to do exactly as they liked and threw themselves into their amusements with great abandon. Some played at Racing Go, some at Dice and Dominoes. Everywhere a litter of the spat-out skins of melon-seeds bore silent testimony to their indulgence.

It was unfortunate that Nannie Li should have chosen such a moment to come stomping in, stick in hand, to call on Bao-yu and to inquire how he was getting on. She could see that Bao-yu was out, and the uproar created in his absence by the maids was deeply offensive to her.

'Now that I've left service and don't come in very often,' she said with a sigh, 'you girls have got worse than ever. The other nannies can do nothing with you. And as for Bao-yu:he's like a six-foot lamp stand that lights up others but stays dark itself; for he's always on about how dirty other people are, but look at the mess he allows you to make of his own room! It's a disgrace!'

Now the maids all knew that Bao-yu did not care about such matters. They also knew that Nannie Li was pensioned off now and had no more power over them. They therefore continued with their fun and took no notice of her. But Nannie Li was not to be ignored. 'How is Bao-yu eating nowadays?' 'what time does he go to bed?' She plied the maids with questions which they answered either cheekily or not at all. One of them even said, quite audibly and in her hearing, 'Old nuisance!'

‘What’s in this covered bowl?’ Nannie Li went on. ‘It’s junket, isn’t it? Why don’t you offer it to me?’ She picked up the gift of koumiss and began to drink it.

‘Don’t you touch that!’ said one of the maids. ‘He was keeping that for Aroma. He’ll be angry when he gets back and finds out about that. You’d better tell him yourself you took it. We don’t want you getting *us* into trouble!’

Nannie Li was angry and embarrassed at one and the same time.

‘I won’t believe it of him,’ she said. ‘I won’t believe he would be so wicked as to grudge his old Nannie a bowl of milk. Why, he *owes* it to me. And not only a bowl of milk, either. Much more precious things than that. Do you mean to tell me that Aroma counts for more with him than I do? He ought to stop and ask himself how he grew up to be the big boy he is today. It’s my milk he sucked, that came from my own heart’s blood: that’s what he grew up on. And you mean to tell me that now, if I drink one little bowlful of *his* milk—*cow’s* milk—he’s going to be angry with me? Well, I *will* drink it, so there! He can do what he likes about it. And as for that Aroma. I don’t know what sort of a wonderful creature you think *she* is - a little bit of a girl I picked out myself and trained with my own hand!’

Defiantly she applied the koumiss once more to her lip and downed it to the last gulp.

One of the maids, politer than the rest, attempted to placate her:

‘They shouldn’t talk to you like that, Nannie! I’m not surprised you are cross. Of *course* Bao-yu isn’t going to upset himself over a little thing like that. He’s much more likely to send something nice round to you when he hears that you’ve been to see him.’

‘Don’t you try wheedling me with your airs and graces, young woman! ‘ said Nannie Li implacably. ‘You think I don’t know about Snow**pink** being dismissed that time over the tea? You needn’t worry. If he makes a fuss about it tomorrow, *I* shall take the blame.’

She went off in dudgeon.

Presently Bao-yu returned and sent someone off to fetch Aroma. He noticed Skybright lying motionless on the day-bed.

‘What’s the matter with her?’ he asked. ‘Is she ill? Or has she lost the game?’

‘She was winning,’ said Ripple. ‘Then Nannie Li came along and put her off her stroke and she started losing. She got so cross that she had to go and lie down.’

‘You shouldn’t all take the old girl so seriously,’ said Bao-yu. ‘Just leave her to do as she likes and take no notice!’

Just at that moment Aroma arrived and said ‘hullo’ t~ everyone. She asked Bao-yu where he had eaten and what time he had got back. She also gave her mother’s regards to the other maids. When she had finished changing Out of her holiday attire and taken the ‘going-out’ ornaments from her hair, Bao-yu asked someone to fetch the koumiss. There was a chorus of replies from the maids:

‘Nannie Li drank it!’

Bao-yu was about to say-something when Aroma cut in with a smile:

‘So *that’s* what you were saving for me! It was a very kind thought; but last time I had some of that stuff I took too much, being so fond of it, and gave myself a terrible stomach-ache. It didn’t go away until I’d brought it all up again, and it’s put me off it ever since. It’s a good job really that she *did* drink it. It would only have got left around and gone bad. Now what I’d *really* fancy are some dried chestnuts, if you’d like to be peeling them for me while I make up your bed on the king.’

Bao-yu was completely taken in by this little ruse, and forgetting all about the koumiss, went off for some chestnuts and sat down by the lamp to peel them. He and Aroma were flow alone in the room together. Glancing up with a smile from his peeling he said,

‘What relation of yours was that girl in the **red** dress today?’

‘That’s my mother’s sister’s child.’

Bao-yu made appreciative noises.

‘What are you “oo-ing” and “ah-ing” about?’ said Aroma. ‘No, don’t tell me! I know how your mind works. You think she’s not *good* enough to wear **red.**’

‘No. On the contrary,’ said Bao-yu. ‘If she’s not good enough to wear **red,** I shouldn’t think *anyone* is. No, I was merely thinking what a beautiful girl she is and how nice it would be if we could have her to live with us here.’

‘Because I have the misfortune to be a slave,’ Aroma said bitterly, ‘does that mean that all my relations ought to be slaves too? I suppose you think every pretty girl you see is just waiting to be bought so that she can be a servant in your household!’

‘How touchy you are!’ said Bao-yu. ‘Having her to live with us doesn’t have to mean as a servant, does it? It could mean as a bride.’

‘Thank you, I’m sure!’ said Aroma. ‘But my folk are not quite grand enough for that!’

Bao-yu was unwilling to pursue a conversation that had become so unpleasant and went on peeling in silence.

‘Why don’t you say something?’ said Aroma. ‘I suppose I’ve upset you now. Well, never mind! Tomorrow you can go out and buy the lqt of them, just to spite me!’

‘I don’t see what answer I *can* give when you say things like that,’ said Bao-yu. ‘I only said what a nice girl she was. I think she is exactly suited to live in a big, wealthy household like ours. Much more so than some of the lumbering idiots who do live here.’

‘She may not have that much good fortune,’ said Aroma; ‘but for all that she has been very delicately brought up - the apple of my aunt’s and uncle’s eye. She was seventeen this holidays, and her trousseau is all ready for her to be married next year.’

‘Hai!’

An involuntary expression of regret broke from him when he heard that the girl in **red** was to be married. Already Aroma’s words had made him uneasy; but worse was to follow.

‘I haven’t been able to see much of my cousins during these last few years,’ she said with a sigh, ‘and now it looks as if they will all have left home when I do go back.’

There was obviously a good deal more that lay behind this remark. Startled, he threw down the chestnut he was peeling and asked her:

‘How do you mean, “when you do go back”?’

‘Today I heard my mother discussing it with my elder brother. They want me to hold Out this one year more, then next year they will see about buying me out of service.,

Bao-yu was becoming more and more alarmed.

‘Why should they want to buy you out of service ?’

‘Well upon my word, that’s a funny question to ask!’ said Aroma. ‘I’m not one of your house-born slaves, my family lives elsewhere. I’m the only member of my family away from home. There’s no future for me here. *Naturally* I want to rejoin them.’

‘You can’t if J won’t let you,’ said Bao-yu.

‘I never heard of such a thing!’ said Aroma:

‘Even in palace hall
Law is the lord of all.

A bond is a bond. When their term of service has ended, you *have* to let people go. You can’t force them to stay in service for ever and ever - especially a household like yours.’

Bao-yu thought a bit. What she said seemed reasonable enough.

‘But suppose Grandmother won’t let you?’

‘Why shouldn’t she?’ said Aroma. ‘If I were a very exceptional sort of person, it’s quite possible that she and Her Ladyship might feel upset at the idea of losing me and offer my family money to let me stay on. But as it is I’m

only a very ordinary sort of maid. There are any number much better than me. I started off with Her Old Ladyship and served Miss Shi for a few years. Then I was transferred to you, and I've already been quite a few years with you. They would think it quite natural that my family should want to buy me out now. In fact, I wouldn't be surprised if they let me go as a kindness without even asking for the money. If you think they wouldn't let me go because I've served you so well, that's just ridiculous. Serving you well is no more nor less than what I'm supposed to do. It's my job. There's nothing remarkable about that. There'll be plenty of other good ones to take my place when I'm gone. I'm not irreplaceable.'

Everything Aroma said pointed to the reasonableness of her going and the unreasonableness of her staying. A kind of desperateness began to seize him.

'That may be so,' he said, 'but if I'm absolutely determined to keep you, I'm sure Grandmother would speak to your mother about it. If Grandmother had a talk with your mother and offered her a really large sum of money, surely she wouldn't refuse?'

'I'm sure my mother would never insist,' said Aroma. 'And I don't only mean if you spoke to her and gave her a lot of money. Even if you didn't speak to her about it and didn't give her any money at all, but simply made up your minds to keep me here against my will and say nothing, I'm sure she wouldn't dare object. But your family has never gone in for throwing its weight about like that in the past, and I don't believe it is going to start doing so now. It would be different if I were just an object you'd taken a fancy to and they could get it for you without any danger of upsetting the owner by simply offering him ten times the price. But I'm not an object. If you were to keep me here without rhyme or reason against my will, you'd not only be doing yourselves no good, you'd be breaking up someone else's family; and that's something I'm quite sure Her Old Ladyship and Her Ladyship would *never* be willing to do.'

For some time Bao-yu reflected in silence. At last he spoke:

'The long and short of all this is that you are definitely going, is that right?'

'Definitely.'

'Who would have believed that so sweet a person could be so faithless and unfeeling?' he thought to himself. But all he said was:

'If I had known all along that in the end you would go away and leave me on my own, I should never have let you work for me in the first place.'

And with those words he took himself off to bed in a thoroughly bad humour and composed himself for sleep.

Now Aroma's mother and elder brother *had* spoken earlier that day about their intention of buying her out of service, but Aroma had at once stated that she would never go back home as long as she lived.

'When you sold me in the first place,' she said, 'it was because you had nothing to eat and I was the only thing you had left in the house which was worth a bit of money. I couldn't have refused to go and watched my own mother and father starve. But now, fortunately, I've got a good situation—one in which I'm not beaten and sworn at all day long and where I'm fed and clothed as well as the masters themselves—and the rest of you, inspire of losing Father, have managed to get in the clear again and are as well off now as you've ever been. If you were still hard up and wanted to buy me out so that you could raise a bit of money by reselling me, there would be some point in it. But you're not. What do you want to buy me out *for? Why* don't you just pretend that I'm dead, then you won t need to think about buying me Out any mote?'

And after that she had had a little cry.

Seeing her so adamant, her mother and brother had naturally resigned themselves to her continuing in service. They did *so* the more readily as Aroma's contract was, in point of fact, for life. In seeking to redeem her they would have had to rely on the customary generosity of the Jias, who, as soon as they were approached on the subject, would in all probability restore not only the person of Aroma but also the body-price offered for her, but who were certainly not under any obligation to do so.

Another consideration which predisposed them to let her stay was the well-known fact— already mentioned by

Aroma—that the Jia household did not ill-treat its servants and relied more on kindness than coercion in its dealings with them. Indeed, the 'inside maids'—those who, like Aroma, were m personal attendance on members of the family (and this was true of *all* of them, no matter in whose apartment they were employed) were the crême *de la crême* of the household staff and were even regarded as a cut above the free daughters of poorer households outside.

Later, when Bao-yu unexpectedly arrived on the scene and they saw how it was between him and Aroma, the reason for her reluctance to leave service at once became apparent. It was a factor they had not foreseen; but now they recognized it, it is a great weight off their minds, and it was not without feelings of relief that they abandoned all further thought of attempting to purchase her freedom.

But to return to our story.

Since early youth Aroma had always been aware that Bao-yu's character was peculiar. His naughtiness and intractability exceeded those of normal boys, and in addition he had a number of extraordinary eccentricities of his own which she could scarcely even have put a name to. Recently he had taken advantage of the comparative immunity. from parental control, afforded him by the all-encompassing protection of his doting grandmother, to become even more wild and self-indulgent and even more confirmed in his aversion to serious pursuits than in previous years, and all her attempts to remonstrate with him met with the same obstinate unwillingness to hear. Today's talk about buying her out of service turned out to be providential. By employing only a minimum of deceit, she could use it as a means of ascertaining his real feelings towards her and of humbling his spirit a little, so that he might be in a suitably chastened frame of mind for the lecture with which she was preparing to admonish him. She judged from his going off silently to bed that he was shaken and a little unsure of himself. Evidently she had succeeded in the first part of her plan.

Aroma had not really wanted the chestnuts. She had pretended to do so because she was afraid that the matter of the koumiss might blow up into an incident like the earlier one involving Snow**pink** and the tea. By pretending to want chestnuts she had deflected him from pursuing it further. She now told the younger maids to take them away and eat them them-selves, while she went over to rouse up Bao-yu. The face that he lifted from the pillow was wet with tears.

'Now what do you want to go upsetting yourself like that for?' she said with a smile. 'If you *really* want me to stay, of course I won't go.'

Bao-yu at once brightened up.

'Tell me!' he said. 'Tell me what I must do to *prove* to you how much I want you to stay, since nothing I say myself seems any good!'

'I know we're both fond of each other,' said Aroma. 'That doesn't need any proving. But if you want to be sure of my staying here, it mustn't only be because of that. There are three other things I want to talk to you about. If you will promise to obey me in all of *them,* I shall know that you really and truly want me to stay; then nothing - not even a knife at my throat - will ever make me leave you!'

'Tell me what they are!' he said impetuously. 'I promise to obey you. Dearest Aroma! Sweetest Aroma! Never mind two or three: I would promise if it were two or three *hundred* All I ask is that you shouldn't leave me. If the day ever comes when nothing remains of me but floating particles of ash - no, not ash. Ash has form and substance and perhaps consciousness too. Say smoke. A puff of thin smoke dissolved upon the wind. When that is all that remains of me, and you can no longer fuss over me because there is nothing left to fuss over, and I can no longer pay attention to you because there is nothing left to pay attention with - when that time comes, you may go or stay as you please!'

'My dear young gentleman,' said Aroma exasperatedly, dapping her hand over his mouth to prevent him saying any more, 'it's precisely this way of carrying on that I was going to talk to you about, and here you go, ranting away worse than ever!'

'Right,' said Bao-yu. 'Right. I promise never to talk that way again.'

‘That was the *first* thing I wanted you to reform.’
‘I’ve reformed already,’ said Bao-yu. ‘If I ever talk that way again, you can pinch my lips! Then what?’
‘The second thing is this,’ said Aroma. ‘I don’t care whether you really like studying or not, but even if you don’t, I’d like you at least to pretend that you do when you’re with the Master or any other gentlemen, and not always be making sarcastic remarks about it. If you could only put on an appearance of liking it, he would have less cause to be angry with you, and could even take a bit of pride in you when he was talking to his friends. Look at it from his point of view. Every generation of your family up to now have been scholars. Then suddenly *you* come along. Not only do you hate studying -that’s already enough to make him feel angry and upset - but on top of that you have to be forever making rude remarks about it - and not only behind his back but even when he’s there. According to you anyone who studies and tries to improve himself is a “career worm”. According to you the *Illumination of Clear Virtue* or whatever it’s called is the only genuine book ever written and all the test are forgeries. No wonder the Master gets so angry with you. No wonder he’s every minute of the day wishing he could lay his hands on you and give you a thrashing.’
Bao-yu laughed.
‘All right. I won’t say such things any more. In any case, these are all things I used to say when I was younger and didn’t know any better. I don’t say things like that nowadays. What else?’
‘You must leave off forever going on about people’s appearance and interfering with their make-up—and you *must* give up that filthy habit of stealing people’s lipstick and eating it on the sly. That’s *most* important I’
‘I’ll reform! I’ll reform! Is there anything else, now?’
‘Nothing else, really. Just to be a bit more careful about things in general and not always letting yourself get carried away by your whims and fancies. But if you will really keep your promise about these three things I’ve mentioned, *I* will promise never to leave you - even if they send a bridal chair and eight strong bearers to carry me away!’
‘Oh, come now! Isn’t that stretching it a bit?’ said Bao-yu with a laugh. ‘For eight bearers and a handsome husband I bet you’d go!’
‘It wouldn’t interest me in the least,’ said Aroma haughtily. “‘Kind sir, for such blessing I am not willing.” Even if I *did* go, I should take no pleasure in it.’
Their dialogue was interrupted by Ripple, who just at that moment entered the room.
‘It’s nearly midnight, you two. You ought to be in bed. Her Old Ladyship just now sent one of the nannies round to ask about you and I told her you were asleep.’
Bao-yu asked for his watch and looked. The hand was pointing to half past eleven. He washed and cleaned his teeth all over again, and taking off his outer clothes, settled down once more to sleep.

*

When Aroma got up first thing next morning she felt heavy and unwell. Her head ached, her eyelids were puffy and her whole body was afire. At first she dragged herself round performing her usual tasks, but eventually she could hold out no longer and had to lie down fully clothed on the kang. Bao-yu at once informed Grandmother Jia, who called in a doctor. Having taken Aroma’s pulses, the doctor informed them that she had ‘merely contracted a severe chill and would be all right after taking a few doses of medicine to relieve the congestion,’ and left after writing a prescription. Bao-yu sent out for the materials prescribed, and when they had been duly boiled up and the first draught taken, made her cover herself with a quilt to bring on a perspiration. Then he went off to see Dai-yu.

Dai-yu was at that moment taking a midday nap. Her maids had all gone off about their own affairs. Not a sound could be heard from the inside room As Bao-yu lifted the embroidered door-curtain and entered, he could

see her lying asleep inside and hurried over to rouse her:

'Sleeping after you've just eaten, coz? That's bad I Wake up!'

His voice woke her. She opened her eyes and saw that it was Bao-yu.

'Do go away and play for a bit! I'm so dreadfully tired. I didn't get any sleep last night and I haven't been able to rest until now.'

'Never mind how tired you are,' said Bao-yu. 'You'll do yourself much more harm by sleeping after a meal. I'll' stay and amuse you to keep you awake if you feel sleepy.'

'I'm not sleepy, I'm *tired.* I want to *rest* for a bit. Can't you go and amuse yourself somewhere else for a few minutes and come back later?'

Bao-yu gave her another shake.

'Where else *can* I go?' he said. 'I'm so *bored* with everyone else.'

'Chee-ee-ee!' Dai-yu exploded in a little laugh. 'All right. I suppose now you are here you may as well stay. You can sit very, very quietly over there and we will talk.'

'I should prefer to lie down,' said Bao-yu.

'All right, lie down then!'

'There isn't a pillow. We shall have to share yours.'

'Don't be ridiculous!' said Dai-yu. 'Look at all those pillows in the next room. Why don't you get yourself one of them?'

Bao-yu went into the outer room for a look but came back empty-handed.

'I don't want any *of them,'* he said genially. 'How do I know some *dirty* old woman hasn't been sleeping on them?'

Dai-yu opened her eyes very wide.

'You really are the bane of my life!' she said. 'Here, take this!' She pushed the pillow she had been lying on towards him and got up to fetch another one of her own to replace it with. The two of them then reclined, facing each other, at opposite ends of the bed.

Glancing up from her recumbent position, Dai-yu noticed that there was a blood-spot about the size of a small button on Bao-yu's left cheek. She bent over him to examine it more closely and touched it lightly with her finger.

'Whose nails was it this time?'

Bao-yu lay back to avoid her scrutiny and laughed.

'It isn't a scratch. I've just been helping them make rouge. A little of it must have splashed on to my face.' He rummaged for a handkerchief to wipe it off with.

Dai-yu wiped it off with her own, clicking her tongue censoriously as she did so.

'So you're up to *those* tricks again? You might at least refrain from advertising the fact! Even if Uncle doesn't see you himself, someone else might who thought it an amusing story to go around gossiping about. He could easily get to hear about it in that way, and that would make it unpleasant for *all* of us.'

But her words were lost on Bao-yu. He was preoccupied with a subtle fragrance which seemed to emanate from Dai-yu's sleeve - a fragrance that intoxicated the senses and caused one to feel rather limp. He seized hold of the sleeve and demanded to know what perfume she was wearing.

'Perfume? At this season?' said Dai-yu with a laugh. 'I'm not wearing any. "In the cold winter none smells sweet"!'

'Well, where *does* it come from, then?'

'I don't know myself where it comes from,' said Dai-yu. 'I suppose it might have come from the wardrobe.'

Bao-yu shook his head.

'I doubt it. It's a very unusual scent. Not the kind you would get from a scent-cake or a perfume-ball or sachet.'

'I hope you don't imagine it's some exotic perfume given me by the Immortals of the Isles. Even if I had the

recipe, *I* have no kind elder brother to get together all those flowers and stamens and things and make it up for me. *I* have got only the ordinary, vulgar sorts of perfume!'

'Whatever I say, you are always dragging in things like that,' said Bao-yu. 'Very well, You will have to be taught a lesson. Prom now on, no mercy!'

Half rising, he pretended to spit on his hands, then stretching them out before him, began to waggle his fingers up and down in the region of her ribs and armpits. Dai-yu had always been the most ticklish of mortals, and the mere sight of his waggling fingers sent her off into shrieks of laughter which soon ended in breathlessness:

'Oh! Oh! Bao-yu! No! Stop! I'll be angry!'

'Will you say things like that any more?'

'No,' said Dai-yu, laughing weakly, 'I promise.'

She proceeded to pat her hair into place, smilingly complacently:

'So I've got an unusual fragrance, have I? Haveyou got a *warm* fragrance?'

For the moment Bao-yu was puzzled:

'*Warm* fragrance?'

Dai-yu shook her head pityingly.

'Don't be so dense! You have your jade. *Somebody* has a gold thing to match. Somebody has Cold Fragrance, *ergo* you must have Warm Fragrance to go with it!'

'I've only just let you off,' said Bao-yu, 'and here you go again, worse than ever!'

Once more he stretched out the threatening fingers and Dai-yu again began to shriek.

'No! Bao-yu! *Please!* I promise!'

'All right, I forgive you. But you must let me smell your sleeve.'

He wrapped the free end of that garment over his face and abandoned himself to long and prodigious sniffs.

Dai-yu jerked away her arm.

'I really think you ought to go.'

'Couldn't go if I wanted to. Let's lie down very quietly and genteelly and have a conversation.' And he stretched himself Out again.

Dai-yu lay down too, and covered her face with a handkerchief.

He tried to arouse her interest with desultory chat—talking for the sake of talking. Dai-yu took no notice. He tried asking questions. How old was she when she first came to the Capital? What had the scenery been like on the journey? What places of historical interest were there in Yangchow? What were its inhabitants like? What were its local customs? Dai-yu made no reply. Still concerned that she might fail asleep and injure her health, he tried a ruse.

'Why, yes!' he said, as if suddenly remembering something. 'There's a famous story that took place near Yangchow. I wonder if you know about it.'

This was delivered with so straight a face and in so serious a tone of voice that Dai-yu was quite taken in.

'Oh? What?'

Mastering a strong inclination to laugh, he began to extemporize with whatever came into his head.

'Near the city of Yangchow there is a mountain called Mt Yu-dai, in the side of which is a cavern called the Cave of Lin.'

'That's false, for a start,' said Dai-yu. 'I've never heard of a mountain of that name.'

'There are a great many mountains in this world,' said Bao-yu. 'You could hardly be expected to know all of them. Leave your criticisms until I have finished my story.'

'Carry on,' said Dai-yu.

'Now in the Cave of Lin there lived a tribe of magic mice, and one year, on the seventh day of the last month, the Oldest Mouse climbed up on to his throne and sat in council with the rest of the tribe.

'"Tomorrow is Nibbansday," he said, "and everywhere in the world of men they will be cooking frumenty. Since

our cave is at present short of dry provender, we should take this opportunity of replenishing *our* stores by raiding *theirs."* He took a ceremonial arrow from the receptacle in front of him and handing it to an able younger mouse, instructed him to carry out a reconnaissance. In due course the Able Younger Mouse came back and reported that, though he had looked positively everywhere, there were nowhere more plentiful stores to be found than in the temple at the foot of the mountain.

"'How many kinds of grain have they got there, and how many sorts of dried fruits?" the Oldest Mouse asked him.

'"There is a whole granary full of rice and beans," replied the Able Younger Mouse, "but only five kinds of dried fruits:

the first, **red** dates
the second, chestnut
the third, peanuts
the fourth, caltrops
the fifth, sweet potatoes

'The Oldest Mouse was another arrow, he said,

'"Who will go to steal rice?"

'A mouse at once took the arrow and went off to steal rice.

"'Who will go to steal beans?" he asked, picking up another arrow.

'Another mouse took the arrow and went off to steal beans. 'One by one they departed on their missions until only the sweet potatoes had still to be arranged for.

'The Oldest Mouse took up another arrow.

'"Who will go to steal sweet potatoes?"

'A little puny, weak mouse replied,

' "I will!"

'Seeing how young and puny he was, the Oldest Mouse and the other members of the mousey tribe feared that he would be too lacking in training and experience and too timid and weak to carry out the task, and refused to let him go. But the little mouse said,

"'Although I am young in years and weak in body, I am eloquent and resourceful and possess unlimited magic powers. I can guarantee to carry out this mission even more expeditiously than the rest."

"'How will you do that?" asked the other mice.

"'I shan't rush at the job head-on like the others," said the little mouse. "By just giving my body a couple of shakes I shall change myself into a sweet potato; I shall *roll* myself into the pile of sweet potatoes without anyone seeing me; then -very, very gently I shall *roll* the sweet potatoes away, one by one, until there aren't any more left. Isn't that a more expeditious way of doing it than the crude and headlong approach which the others have adopted?"

"That's all very well," said the other mice, "but what about this transformation business? Let's see you do it first!"

'"Nothing easier!" said the little mouse with a confident smile. "Watch!"

'He gave his body a couple of shakes.

'"Hey presto!"

'And at once he turned into the most exquisitely beautiful young lady.

'The other mice all laughed.

'"No, no, no, you've made a mistake! That's not a sweet potato, that's a young lady you've turned into!"

'The little mouse resumed his own shape and smiled at them pityingly.

‘“It is you who are mistaken. You have seen too little of the world to understand. The vegetable tuber is not the only kind of sweet potato. The daughter of our respected Salt Commissioner Lin is also a sweet potato. She is the sweetest sweet potato of them all.”‘

Dai-yu got up on her knees and, crawling over, planted herself on top of Bao-yu.

‘I’ll teach you to make fun of me, you hateful creature! I’ll teach you!’

She seized his lips between thumb and finger and began to pinch and shake them.

‘Help!’ cried Bao-yu. ‘Mercy! I won’t do it again! It was smelling your beautiful perfume that put me in mind of the allusion.’

‘Allusion?’ said Dai-yu. ‘You vilify someone else and then call it an allusion?’

Just at that moment Bao-chai walked in.

‘Who’s this talking about allusions? I must hear this!’

Dai-yu invited her to sit down.

‘Look I Who else would you expect it to be? He says a lot of horrid things about me and then tells me it’s an allusion!’

‘Oh,’ said Bao-chai. ‘Cousin Bao I’m not surprised, then. He is *full* of allusions. The only trouble is that he tends to forget them at the very moment when they are most needed. If he can remember allusions today, he *ought* to have been able to remember that allusion about the plantain the other night. But no, it just wouldn’t come, and though everyone else was dying of cold, he was perspiring! Yet now his memory has come back again. Strange!’

‘Now praised be!’ said Dai-yu. ‘I have a nice, kind cousin to stick up for me. You’ve met your match now,’ she said to Bao-yu. ‘Now you are going to get as good as you give! Now we shall see you paid in your own coin!’

Their conversation was interrupted by a burst of angry shouting from the direction of Bao-yu’s room.

The occasion of it will be discussed in the following chapter.

CHAPTER 20

Wang Xi-feng castigates a jealous attitude
with some forthright speaking
And Lin Dai-yu makes a not unattractive speech
impediment the subject of a jest

We have shown how Bao-yu was in Dai-yu’s room telling her the story of the magic mice; how Bao-chai burst in on them and twitted Bao-yu with his failure to. remember the **green** wax’ allusion on the night of the Lantern Festival; and how the three of them sat teasing each other with good-humoured banter.

Bao-yu had been afraid that by sleeping after her meal Dai-yu would give herself indigestion or suffer from insomnia through being insufficiently tired when she went to bed at night, but Bao-chai’s arrival and the lively conversation that followed it banished all Dai-yu’s desire to sleep and enabled him to lay aside his anxiety on her behalf.

Just then a sudden commotion arose from the direction of Bao-yu’s room, and the three of them stopped talking and turned their heads to listen. Dai-yu was the first to speak:

‘That’s your Nannie quarrelling with Aroma,’ she said. ‘To think how that poor girl goes out of her way to be nice to the old woman, yet *still* she manages to find fault with her! She really must be getting senile.’

Bao-yu was for rushing over straight away, but Bao-chai restrained him:

‘Don’t go quarrelling with your Nannie, whatever you do! She’s only a silly old woman. You have to indulge her a bit.’

‘Of course,’ said Bao-yu and ran off.

He found Nannie Li leaning on her stick in the middle of the room abusing Aroma.:

‘Ungrateful little baggage! After all I’ve done for you—and now when I come to call on you, you lie back there on the kang like a young madam and haven’t even the grace to look up and take notice of me! You and your airs and graces! All you ever think about is how to win Bao-yu over to you. Thanks to you he won’t listen to me any more. He only does what you say. To think that a cheap bit of goods like you that they only paid a few taels of silver for should come along here and turn the whole place upside down I The best thing they could do with you would be to marry you off to one of the boys and send you packing. *Then* we’d see how you managed to play the siren and lead young gentlemen astray!’

Aroma at first thought that Nannie Li’s anger arose solely on account of her failure to get up and welcome her, and had started to excuse herself on that supposition:

‘I’m ill, Mrs Li. I’ve just been sweating. I didn’t see you because I had my head under the clothes.’

But when the old woman proceeded to go on about leading young men astray and marrying her off to a servant and what not, she felt wronged and humiliated, and in spite of her efforts to restrain them, burst into tears of sheer helplessness.

Bao-yu had heard all this, and though too embarrassed to argue, could scarcely refrain from saying a word or two in Aroma’s defence:

‘She’s ill. She’s having to take medicine,’ he said. ‘If you don’t believe me, ask any of the maids.’

This made the o1d woman even angrier.

‘Oh yes! You stick up for the little hussies! You don’t care about *me* any more! And which of them am I supposed to ask, pray? They will all take your side against me. You are all under Aroma’s thumb, every one of you. I know what goes on here, don’t think I don’t! Well, you can come along with me to see Her Old Ladyship and Her Ladyship about this. Let *them* heat how you have cast me off—me that reared you at my own breast—now that you don’t need my milk any more, and how you encourage a pack of snotty-nosed little maidservants to amuse themselves at my expense!’

She was in tears herself by now, and wept as she cursed.

By this time Dai-yu and Bao-chai had also arrived on the scene and did their best to calm her:

‘Come, Nannie! Be a bit more forbearing with them! Try to forget about it!’

Nannie Li turned towards this new audience and proceeded to pour out her troubles in an interminable gabble in which tea and Snow**pink** and drinking koumiss mingled incoherently.

Xi-feng happened to be in Grandmother Jia’s room totting up the day’s scores for the final settlement when she heard this hubbub in the rear apartment. She identified it immediately as Nannie Li on the rampage once more, taking out on Bao-yu’s unfortunate maids some of the spleen occasioned by her recent gambling losses. At once she hurried over, seized Nannie Li by the hand, and admonished her with smiling briskness:

‘Now, Nannie, we mustn’t lose our tempers! This is the New Year holiday and Her Old Ladyship has been enjoying herself all day. A person of your years ought to be stopping other people from quarrelling, not upsetting Her Old Ladyship by quarrelling yourself. Surely you know better than that? If anyone has been misbehaving, you have only to tell me and I’ll have them beaten for you. Now I’ve got a nice hot pheasant stew in my room. You just come along with me and you shall have some of that and a drink to go with it I’

She proceeded to haul her off the premises, addressing a few words over her shoulder to her maid Felicity as she went:

‘Felicity, bring Nannie’s stick for her, there’s a good girl! And for goodness’ sake give her a handkerchief to wipe her eyes with!’

Unable to hold her ground, the old Nannie was borne off in Xi-feng’s wake, muttering plaintively as she went:

‘I wish I was dead, I really do! But I’d sooner forget myself and make a scene like I have today and be shamed in front of you all than put up with the insolence of those shameless little baggages!’

Watching this sudden exit, Bao-chai and Dai-yu laughed and clapped their hands:
'How splendid! Just the sort of wind we needed to *blow* the old woman away!'
But Bao-yu shook his head and sighed:
'I wonder what had really upset her. Obviously she only picked on Aroma because she is weak and can't defend herself. I wonder which of the girls had offended her to make her so .
He was interrupted by Skybright:
'Why should any of us want to upset her? Do you think we're mad? And even if we *had* offended her, we should be perfectly capable of owning up to it and not letting someone else take the blame!'
Aroma grasped Bao-yu's hand and wept:
'Because I offended one old nurse, you have to go offending a whole roomful of people. Don't you think there's been enough trouble already without dragging other people into it?'
Seeing how ill she looked and realizing that distress of mind could only aggravate her condition, Bao-yu stifled his indignation and did his best to comfort her so that she might be able to settle down once more and continue sweating out the fever. Her skin was burning to the touch. He decided to stay with her for a while, and lying down beside her, spoke to her soothingly:
'Just try to get better, now! Never mind all that other nonsense! It's of no importance.'
Aroma smiled bitterly.
'If I had allowed myself to get upset about things like that, I shouldn't have lasted in this room for five minutes! Still, if we're *always* going to have this sort of trouble, I think in the long run I just *shan't* be able to stand any more. You don't seem to realize. You offend people on my account and the next moment you've forgotten all about it. But *they* haven't. It's all scored up against me; and as soon as something goes a bit wrong, they come out with all these horrible things about me. It makes it so unpleasant for all of us.'
She cried weakly as she said this, but presently checked her-self for fear of upsetting Bao-yu.
Soon the odd-job woman came in with the second infusion of Aroma's medicine. Bao-yu could see that she had started sweating again and told her not to get up, holding the medicine for her himself and supporting her while she drank it. Then he told one of the junior maids to make up a bed for her on the kang.
'Whether you're going to eat there or not,' Aroma said to him, 'you'd better go and sit with Her Old Ladyship and Her Ladyship for a bit and play a while with the young ladies before you come back here again. I shall be all right if I lie here quietly on my own.'
Bao-yu thought he had better do as she said, and after waiting until she had taken off her ornaments and was lying tucked up in bed, he went to the front apartment and took his dinner with Grandmother Jia.
After dinner Grandmother Jia wanted to go on playing cards with some of the old stewardesses. Bao-yu, still worrying about Aroma, returned to his own room, where he found her sleeping fitfully. He thought of going to bed himself, but it was still too early. Skybright, Mackerel, Ripple and Emerald had gone off in quest of livelier entertainment, hoping to persuade Grandmother Jia's maids, Faithful and Amber, to loin them in a game. Only Musk was left in the outer room, playing Patience under the lamp with a set of dominoes. Bao-yu smiled at her.
'Why don't you go off to loin the others?'
'I haven't got any money.'
'There's a great pile of money under the bed. Isn't that enough for you to lose?'
'If we all went off to play,' said Musk, 'who would look after this room? There's *her* sick inside. And lamps and stoves burning everywhere. The old women were practically dead on their feet after waiting on you all day; I *had* to let them go and rest. And the girls have been on duty all day, too. You could scarcely grudge them some time off now for amusement.—Which leaves only me to look after the place.'
'Another Aroma,' thought Bao-yu to himself and gave her another smile.
'I'll sit here while you're away. There's nothing to worry about here if you'd *like* to go.'
'There's even less excuse for going if *you* are here,' said Musk. 'Why can't we both sit here and talk?'

‘What can we do?’ said Bao-yu. ‘Just sitting here talking is going to be rather dull. I know! You were saying this morning that your head was itchy. As you haven’t got anything else to do now, I’ll comb it for you.’

‘All right,’ said Musk, and fetching her toilet-box with the mirror on top she proceeded to take off her ornaments and shake her hair out. Bao-yu took a comb and began to comb it for her. But he had not drawn it more than four or five times through her hair, when Skybright came bursting in to get some more money Seeing the two of them together, she smiled sarcastically:

‘Fancy! Doing her hair already - before you’ve even drunk the marriage-cup I’

Bao-yu laughed.

‘Come here! I’ll do yours for you too, if you like!’

‘I wouldn’t presume, thanks all the same I’

She took the money, and with a swish of the door-blind was gone.

Bao-yu was standing behind Musk as she sat looking at herself in the mirror. Their eyes met in the glass and they both laughed.

‘Of all the girls in this room she has the sharpest tongue,’ said Bao-yu.

Musk signalled to him agitatedly in the glass with her hand. Bao-yu took her meaning; but it was too late. With another swish of the door-blind, Skybright had already darted in again.

‘Oh! Sharp-tongued, am I? Perhaps you’d like to say a bit more on that subject?’

‘Get along with you!’ laughed Musk. ‘Don’t go starting any *more* arguments!’

‘And don’t you go sticking up for him!’ said Skybright gaily. ‘I know what you’re up to, you two. You don’t deceive me with your goings-on. I’ll have something to say to you about this when I get back later. Just wait until I’ve won some of my money back!’

With that she darted off once more.

When Bao-yu had finished combing her hair, he asked Musk to help him get to bed—very quietly, so as not to disturb Aroma.

And that ends our account of that day.

*

First thing next morning Aroma awoke to find that she had sweated heavily during the night and that her body felt very much lighter; but she would take only a little congee for breakfast in order not to tax her system too soon. Bao-yu saw that there was no further cause for concern, and after his meal drifted off to Aunt Xue’s apartment in search of amusement.

Now this was the prime of the year, when the schoolroom is closed for the New Year holiday and the use of the needle is forbidden to maidenly fingers throughout the whole of the Lucky Month, so that boys and girls alike are all agreeably unemployed, and Bao-yu’s half-brother Jia Huan, on holiday like all the rest, had also drifted over to Aunt Xue’s place in search of amusement. He found Bao-chai, Caltrop and Oriole there playing a game of Racing Go, and after watching them for a bit, wanted to play too.

Bao-chai had always behaved towards Jia Huan in exactly the same way as she did towards Bao-yu and made no distinctions between them. Consequently, when he asked to play, she at once made a place for him and invited him to join them on the kang. They played for stakes of ten cash each a game. Jia Huan won the first game and felt very pleased. But then, as luck would have it, he lost several times in a row and began to get somewhat rattled.

It was now his turn to throw the dice. He needed seven to win, and if he threw anything less than seven, the dice would go next to Oriole, who needed only three. He hurled them from the pot with all his might. One of them rested at two. The other continued rather erratically to roll about. ‘Ace! Ace! Ace!’ cried Oriole, clapping her hands. ‘Six I Seven! Fight I’ shouted Jia Huan glaring at Oriole and commanding the die to perform the

impossible. But the perverse wanderer finally came to rest with the ace uppermost, making a grand total of three. With the speed of desperation Jia Huan reached out and snatched it up, claiming, as he did so, that it was a six.

'It was an ace,' said Oriole, 'as plain as anything I'

Bao-chai could see that Jia Huan was rattled, and darting a sharp look at Oriole, commanded her to yield.

'You grow more unmannerly every day,' she told her. 'Surely you don't think one of the masters would cheat you? Come on! Put your money down!'

Oriole smarted with the injustice of this, but her mistress had ordered it, so she had to pay up without arguing. She could not, however) forbear a few rebellious mutterings:

'Huh! One of the masters! Cheating a maid out of a few coppers! Even *I* should be ashamed! Look how much money Bao-yu lost when he was playing with us the other day, yet *he* didn't mind. Even when some of the maids took all he had left, he only laughed...'

She would have gone on, but Bao-chai checked her angrily. 'How can I hope to compete with Bao-yu?' said Jia Huan, beginning to blubber. 'You're all afraid of him. You all take his part against me because I'm only a concubine's son.'

Bao-chai was shocked:

'Please don't say things like that, Cousin! You'll make yourself ridiculous.'

Once more she rebuked Oriole.

Just at that moment Bao-yu walked in) and seeing the state that Jia Huan was in) asked him what was the matter. But Jia Huan dared not say anything.

Bao-chai, familiar with the state of affairs, normal in other families, which places the younger brother in fearful subjection to the elder, assumed that Jia Huan was afraid of Bao-yu. She was unaware that Bao-yu positively disliked anyone being afraid of him. 'We are both equally subject to our parents' control,' he would say of himself and Jia Huan. 'Why should I create a greater distance between us by trying to control him myself - especially when I am the wife's son and he is the concubine's? People already talk behind our backs, even when I do nothing. It would be ten times worse if I were to start bossing him about.'

But' there was another, zanier, notion which contributed to this attitude. Let us try to explain it. Bao-yu had from early youth grown up among girls. There were his sisters Yuan-chun and Tan-chun, his cousins of the same surname Ying-chun and Xi-chun, and his distaff-cousins Shi Xiang-yun, Lin Dai-yu and Xue Bao-chai. As a result of this upbringing, he had come to the conclusion that the pure essence of humanity was all concentrated in the female of the species and that males were its mere dregs and off-scourings. To him, therefore, all members of his own sex without distinction were brutes who might just as well not have existed. Only in the case of his father, uncles and brother, where rudeness and disobedience were expressly forbidden by the teachings of Confucius, did he make an exception—and even then the allowances he made in respect of the fraternal bond were extremely perfunctory. it certainly never occurred to him that his own maleness placed him under any obligation to set an example to the younger males in his clan. The latter—Jia Huan included—reciprocated with a healthy disrespect only slightly tempered by their fear of his doting grandmother.

But Bao-chai was ignorant of ail this; and fearing that Bao-yu might embarrass them all by delivering a big brother's telling-off, she hastened to Jia Huan's defence.

'What are you crying about in the middle of the New Year holidays?' said Bao-yu to Jia Huan, ignoring Bao-chai's excuses. 'If you don't like it here, why don't you go some-where else? I think your brains must have been addled by too much study. Can't you see that if there is something you don't like, there must be something else you do like, and that all you've got to do is leave the one and go after the other? Not hang on to it and cry. Crying won't make it any better. You came here to enjoy yourself, didn't you? And now you're here you re miserable, right? Then the thing to do is to go somewhere else, isn't it?'

In the face of such an argument Jia Huan could not very well remain

When he got back to his own apartment, his real mother, 'Aunt' Zhao (Lady Wang was his mother only in name)

observed the dejected state he was in.

'Who's been making a doormat of you this time?' she asked him, and, obtaining no immediate reply, asked again.

'I've just been playing at Bao-chai's. Oriole cheated me and Bao-yu turned me out.'

Aunt Zhao spat contemptuously:

'Nasty little brat! That's what comes of getting above yourself. Who asked you to go playing with that lot? You could have gone anywhere else to play. Asking for trouble!'

Just at that moment Xi-feng happened to be passing by outside, and hearing what she said, shouted back at her through the window:

'What sort of language is that to be using in the middle of the New Year holiday? He's only a child. He hasn't done anything terrible. What do you want to go carrying on at him like that for? No matter *where* he's been, Sir Zheng and Lady Wang are quite capable of looking after him themselves. There's no cause *for you* to go biting his head off! After all, he *is* one of the masters. If he's misbehaved himself, you should leave the telling-off to those whose job it is. It's no business of yours. Huan I Come out here! Come and play with me!'

Jia Huan had always been afraid of Xi-feng - more even than he was of Lady Wang—and hearing her call him, came running out immediately. Aunt Zhao dated not say a word.

'You're a poor-spirited creature!' Xi-feng said to him. 'How many times have I told you that you can eat and drink and play with any of the boys and girls you like? But instead of doing as I say, you hang about with these other people and let them warp your mind for you and fill it up with mischief. You've no self-respect, that's your trouble. Can't keep away from the gutter. You insist on making yourself disagreeable and then you complain that people are prejudiced against you! Fancy making a fuss like that about losing a few coppers! How much did you lose?'

'One or two hundred,' Jia Huan muttered abjectly.

'All this fuss about one or two hundred cash! And you one of the masters!' She turned to Felicity. 'Go and get a string of cash for him, Felicity, and take him round to the back where Miss Ying and the girls are playing! And ifI have anymore of this nonsense from you in future, young man,' she went on to Jia Huan, 'I'll first give you a good hiding myself and then send someone to tell the school about you and see if *they* can knock a bit of sense into you! It sets your Cousin Lan's teeth on edge to see you so wanting in self-respect. He'd have disembowelled you by now I shouldn't wonder, if I hadn't kept his hands off you! Now be off with you!'

'Yes,' said Jia Huan meekly and went off with Felicity.

When he had got his money, he took himself off to play with Ying-chun and the girls.

And there we must leave him.

*

While Bao-yu was enjoying himself with Bao-chai, a servant announced that Miss Shi had arrived, and he hurriedly got up to go.

'Wait!' said Bao-chai. Let's go and see her together!' She got down from the kang as she said this, and accompanied him round to Grandmother Jia's apartment. Shi Xiang-yun was already there, laughing and chattering away nineteen to the dozen, but rose to greet them as they entered. Dai-yu was there too.

'Where have you been?' she asked Bao-yu.

'Bao-chai's.'

'I see' (very frostily). 'I thought *something* must have been detaining you. Otherwise you would have come flying here long since.'

'Is one only allowed to play with you,' said Bao-yu, 'and keep *you* amused? I just happened to be visiting her. Why should you start making remarks like that?'

‘How thoroughly disagreeable you are!’ said Dai-yu. ‘What do I care whether you go to see her or not? And I’m sure I never asked to be kept amused. From now on you can ignore me completely, as far as I’m concerned.’
With that she went back to her own room in a temper.
Bao-yu came running after.
‘What on *earth* are you upset about this time? Even if I’ve said anything wrong, you ought, out of simple courtesy, to sit and talk with the others for a bit!’
‘Are you telling me how to behave?’
‘Of *course* not. It’s just that you destroy your health by carrying on in this way.’
‘That’s my affair. If I choose to die, I don’t see that it’s any concern of yours.’
‘Oh, really, really I Here we are in the middle of the New Year holiday, and you have to start talking about *death!’*
‘I don’t care. I’ll talk about death if I like. Death! Death!
Death! I’m going to die this minute. If you’re so afraid of death, I wish you long life. A hundred years, will that satisfy you?’
‘Do you think I’m afraid of dying when all you will do is quarrel? I wish I *were* dead. It would be a relief.’
‘Exactly! ‘said Dai-yu. ‘if I were to die, it would be a relief from all this quarrelling!’
‘I said if I were to die,’ said Bao-yu. ‘Don’t twist my words. It isn’t fair.’
Just then Bao-chai came hurrying in.
‘Cousin Shi’s waiting for you!’
She took hold of Bao-yu’s hand and pulled him after her, to the great mortification of Dai-yu, who Sat with her face to the window and shed tears bf pure rage.
After about as long as it would take to drink two cups of tea, Bao-yu came back again. During his absence Dai-yu’s sobs seemed to have redoubled in intensity. Seeing the state she was in he realized that it would need careful handling and began turning over in his mind all kinds of soft and soothing things to coax her with. But before he could get his mouth open, she had anticipated him:
‘What have you come for this time? Why can’t you just leave me here to die in peace? After all, you’ve got anew playmate now - one who can read and write and compose and laugh and talk to you much better than I can. Oh yes, and drag you off to be amused if there’s any danger of your getting upset! I really can’t imagine what you have come back here for!’
‘“Old friends are best friends and close kin are kindest,”‘ said Bao-yu, coming over to where she sat and speaking very quietly. ‘You’re too intelligent not to know that. Even a simpleton like me knows that much! Take kinship first: you are my cousin on Father’s side; Cousin Bao is only a mother-cousin. That makes you much the closer kin. And as for length of acquaintance: it was you who came here first. You and I have practically grown up together—eaten at the same table, even slept in the same bed. Compared with you she’s practically a new arrival. Why should I ever be any less dose to you because of her?’
‘Whatever do you take me for? Do you think I want you to be any less close to *her* because *of me?* It’s the way I feel that makes me the way I am.’
‘And it’s the way I feel,’ said Bao-yu, ‘that makes me the way I am! Do you mean to tell me that you know your Own feelings about me but still don’t know what my feelings are about you?’
Dai-yu lowered her head and made no reply. After a pause she said:
‘You complain that whatever you do people are always getting angry with you. You don’t seem to realize how much you *provoke* them by what you do. Take today, for instance. It’s obviously colder today than it was yesterday. Then why of all days should you choose today to leave your **blue** cape off?’
Bao-yu laughed.
‘I didn’t. I was wearing it this morning the same as usual; but when you started quarrelling just now, I got into such a sweat that I had to take it off.’

‘Next thing you’ll be catching a cold,’ said Dai-yu with a sigh, ‘and then Heaven knows what grumblings and scoldings there will be!’

Just then Xiang-yun burst in on them and reproved them smilingly for abandoning her:

‘Couthin Bao, Couthin Lin: you can thee each other every day. It’th not often I get a chanthe to come here; yet now I *have* come, you both ignore me!’

Dai-yu burst out laughing:

‘Lisping doesn’t seem to make you any less talkative! Listen to you: “Couthin!” “Couthin” Presently, when you’re playing Racing Go, you’ll be all “thicktheth” and “theventh”!’

‘You’d better not imitate her,’ said Bao-yu. ‘It’ll get to be a habit. You’ll be lisping yourself before you know where you are.’

‘How you do pick on one I’ said Xiang-yun. ‘Always finding fault. Even if you are tho perfect yourthelf, I don’t thee why you have to go making fun of everyone elthe. But I can show you thomeone you won’t dare to find fault with. I shall certainly think you a wonder if you do.’

‘Who’s that?’ said Dai-yu

‘If you can find any shortcomings in Cousin Bao-chai’, said Xiang-yun, ‘you must be very good indeed.’

‘Oh *her,’* said Dai-yu coldly. ‘I wondered whom you could mean. I should never dare to find fault with *her.’*

But before she could say any more, Bao-yu cut in and hurriedly changed the subject.

‘I shall never be a match for you as long as I live,’ Xiang-yun said to Dai-yu with a disarming smile. ‘All I can thay ith that I hope you marry a lithping huthband, tho that you have “ithee-withee” “ithee-withee” in your earth every minute of the day. Ah, Holy Name I think I can thee that blethed day already before my eyeth!’

Bao-yu could not help laughing; but Xiang-yun had already turned and fled.

If you wish to know the conclusion of this scene, you must read the following chapter.

CHAPTER 21

Righteous Aroma discovers how to rebuke her
master by saying nothing
And artful Patience is able to rescue hers by being
somewhat less than truthful

As Shi Xiang-yun, fearful that Dai-yu would pursue he; turned and fled, Bao-yu shouted after her:

‘She’s tripped: you needn’t worry! She’ll never catch up with you now!’

And when Dai-yu reached the doorway where he was standing, he spread his arms across it to stop her getting by and laughingly begged an amnesty for Xiang-yun.

‘Never!’ said Dai-yu, endeavouring to tug one of his hands away from the door-jamb. ‘I’ll get that Yun if it’s the last thing I do!’

With Bao-yu blocking the doorway and Dai-yu evidently unable to get past him, Xiang-yun deemed it safe to stop running, and turned to plead with her pursuer:

‘Pleathe cousin, lust this once—spare me!’

Just then Bao-chai appeared from behind her shoulder—the smiling peacemaker:

‘I advise you two to make it up, for Cousin Bao’s sake.’

‘I *won’t!’* said Dai-yu. ‘You’re all in league against me. You have all come here to make fun of me.’

‘Oh, *really!’* said Bao-yu. ‘Who would ever have the nerve to make fun of you? Yun only said what she said because you mimicked her in the first place. She’d never have dared to otherwise.’

It is hard to say how long the four of them might have remained there in this impasse had not a servant arrived at that moment and summoned them to dinner in Grandmother Jia's room. It was already lighting-up time and Lady Wang, Li Wan, Xi-feng, Ying-chun, Tan-chun and Xi-chun had also forgathered for the meal. When dinner was over, the company conversed for a while and then retired to their various rooms for the night—Xiang-yun to sleep with Dai-yu in what had once, in the days when she lived with Grandmother Jia, been her own bedroom. Bao-yu saw the two of them back to their room and stayed there talking until well after ten, in spite of frequent summonses by Aroma.

As soon as it was light next morning, Bao-yu was off again to the girls' room, shuffling along in his slippers and with a gown thrown loosely round his shoulders. The maids Nightingale and Kingfisher were not yet about, and their two young mistresses still lay fast asleep under the covers. Dai-yu was tightly cocooned in a quilt of apricot-coloured damask, the picture of tranquil repose Xiang-yun, by contrast, lay with her hank of jet-black hair tumbled untidily beside the pillow, a white arm with its two gold bracelets thrown carelessly outside the bedding and two white shoulders exposed above the peach-**pink** coverlet, which barely reached her armpits.

'A tomboy, even in her sleep!' Bao-yu muttered ruefully as he gently drew the bedding up to cover her. 'She'll get a draught on those shoulders, and next thing she'll be complaining of a stiff neck!'

Dai-yu had by now awakened. She sensed that there was someone else in the room, and guessing that it must be Bao-yu, lifted her head up to look. Sure enough, it was he.

'What are you doing here at this early hour?'

'Early? Getup and have a look and then tell me if you think it's early!'

'You'd better go outside a minute if you want us to get up,' said Dai-yu.

Bao-yu went into the outer room. Dai-yu got up as soon as he had gone out and roused Xiang-yun. When the two girls had slipped into some clothes, Bao-yu came inside again and sat himself down beside the dressing-table. Presently Nightingale and Kingfisher came in to help the girls with their toilet. Xiang-yun finished washing first. Kingfisher was on her way out to empty the basin, when Bao-yu called her back:

'Just a moment! While you are about it I may as well wash too and save myself the trouble of going back to my own room.'

He came over to where she stood, and bending his head down over the basin, scooped up two handfuls of water and began washing his face. Nightingale handed him some scented soap.

'It's all right,' he said, 'there's lots in here already.'

Then he asked for a towel.

Kingfisher pursed her lips up derisively:

'You haven't changed much, have you?'

Ignoring the sarcasm, he demanded crude salt to clean his teeth with, and after rubbing it all round them vigorously with a finger, he rinsed his mouth out with water. That part of his toilet completed, he observed that Xiang-yun had just finished doing her hair and wandered over to where she was sitting.

'Co:: dear, do my hair for me, will you?'

'I'm afraid I can't,' said Xiang-yun.

Bao-yu smiled coaxingly:

'Go on, be a dear! You used to do it for me once.'

'Well, I can't any longer,' said Xiang-yun. I've forgotten how to.'

'It doesn't need very much doing to it,' said Bao-yu. 'I'm not going out anywhere today. Just a few plaits.'

He continued to coax and wheedle until at last she gave in, and taking his head in her hands, sat him down in her place at the dressing-table and proceeded to comb and dress his hair.

Bao-yu never wore any head-covering when he was at home. Instead he had his side-hair done up in a number of little plaits which were looped round over his ears and brought together by means of **red** silk thread into a single large queue at the back. It was fastened by a golden clasp at the end and by four pearl clips at regular intervals

between the clasp and the crown of his head. As Xiang-yun plaited, she noticed that a pearl appeared to be missing.

'What's happened to this clip?' she said. 'I'm sure it used to be the same as the other three. Where has its pearl gone?'

'I lost it,' said Bao-yu.

'I expect it fell off somewhere outside and somebody picked it up,' said Xiang-yun. 'Lucky old somebody!'

'Who knows whether or not he *really* lost it?' said Dai-yu scoffingly. 'For all we know he may have given it to someone to have remounted as a keepsake!'

Bao-yu made no comment, but sat fiddling with the toilet articles that crowded the dressing-table on either side of the mirror. He picked up a pot of rouge, almost without realizing what he was doing, and sat with it poised in his hand, wanting to put it to his lips for a little taste, but afraid Xiang-yun would rebuke him. While he hesitated, Xiang-yun leaned forward from where she was sitting and administered a sharp slap to his hand, causing the rouge-pot to fall from it on to the dressing-table.

'Nathty habit!' she said. 'It's time you gave it up!'

The words were scarcely out of her mouth when Aroma entered. She concluded from the scene that met her eyes that Bao-yu had already completed his toilet, and went back again to attend to her own. Soon after this Bao-chai dropped in.

'Where's Cousin Bao ?' she asked.

"'Cousin Bao" has no time to spend in *here* nowadays,' said Aroma bitterly.

Bao-chai immediately understood.

Aroma sighed.

'I say nothing against being friendly,' she said. 'But this hanging around there morning, noon and night is another matter. However, nothing I say makes any difference. It's just a waste of breath.'

Bao-chai was impressed.

'One mustn't underestimate this maid,' she thought to herself. 'She is obviously a girl of some intelligence.'

And she sat down on the kang with her for a chat. In the course of conversation she inquired casually about her age, family, and various other personal matters, paying careful attention to her answers and gaining from them and from the tone in which they were uttered an increasing respect for this uneducated maid.

Presently Bao-yu came in, whereupon Bao-chai got up and left. Bao-yu commented on her departure:

'Cousin Bao-chai seemed to be very :thick with you just now. Why should she suddenly rush off when *I* come into the room?'

There was no reply, so he repeated his question.

'Are you asking *me?'* said Aroma. *'I* don't know what reasons you all have for your comings and goings.'

The expression on her face as she uttered these words was angrier than he had ever seen her look before.

He laughed.

'Oh dear! Are you in a rage again?'

Aroma laughed mirthlessly.

'It's not for the likes of me to get into rages. But I wish that from now on you would stop coming into this room. After all, you *have* got people to wait on you elsewhere. You don't really need my services. I shall go back to serving Her Old Ladyship, like I used to before.'

With that she closed her eyes and lay back upon the kang.

Bao-yu was alarmed to see her in such a state and impulsively rushed over to the kang t9 soothe her. But Aroma kept her eyes tightly shut and would take no notice. Bao-yu did not know what to do. Just then Musk chanced to enter and he turned to her for help:

'What's up with Aroma?'

'How should I know?' said Musk. 'You'd do better to ask yourself that question.'

Bao-yu was so taken aback that for a while he said nothing. Then, finding their combined hostility too much for him, he got up with a sigh from his suppliant position on the kang.

'All right, ignore me then! I'm going off to sleep, too.'

And he slid from the kang and went off to his own bed to lie down.

For a long time there was no sound from him except for a gentle snoring. Judging that he must be really asleep, Aroma rose from the kang and took a large travelling-cloak to cover him with. A moment later she heard a gentle thud. He had whipped it from him and thrown it to the floor as soon as her back was turned. But when she looked, his eyes were closed as before and he was still pretending to be asleep. The significance of the gesture did not escape her. She nodded slowly and regarded the feigned sleeper sarcastically:

'All right, then! There's no need for you to get angry. From now on I'll just pretend I'm dumb. I won't say another word of criticism. Will that satisfy you?'

This was too much for Bao-yu. He sat bolt upright on his bed.

'What am I supposed to have done this time? And what's all this "criticism" you're talking about? If you *had* been criticizing me it wouldn't be so bad; but when I came in just now, you didn't say *anything:* you simply ignored me. You went and lay down in a huff without my having the faintest idea what it was all about, and now you accuse *me* of behaving unreasonably! I haven't heard a single peep out of you yet to explain what it is that you are angry about I'

'Your own conscience ought to tell you that,' said Aroma. 'You don't need me to tell you.'

They were still arguing when Grandmother Jia sent a servant round to summon him to lunch. He went off to the front apartment, but returned almost immediately after bolting a single bowlful of rice. He found Aroma asleep on the kang and Musk sitting beside her playing Patience with some dominoes. He had long known that Musk was a close ally of Aroma's, so ignoring them both, he marched past them into the inner room, raising the door-curtain for himself as he passed through. Musk followed him automatically, but he pushed her out:

'No, no, I wouldn't presume to trouble you!'

She laughed and went back to her Patience, having first ordered a couple of the younger maids to wait on him in her stead.

In the inner room Bao-yu took up a book and reclined on the kang to read. For a considerable while he remained en-grossed in his reading. When eventually he did look up, in-tending to ask someone for some tea, he saw two little maids waiting there in silence, one of whom - evidently the older by a year or two - was an attractive, intemgent4ooking girl. He addressed himself to her:

'Isn't your name "Nella" something or other?'

'Citronella.'

'Citronella? Who on earth gave you that name?'

'Aroma, sir. My real name is "Soldanella", but Miss Aroma altered it to "Citronella".'

'I don't know why she didn't Call you "Citric Acid" and have done with it,' said Bao-yu. 'Citronella! - How many girls are there in your family, Citronella?'

'Four,' said Citronella.

'And which of the four are you?'

'I'm the youngest.'

'Right!' said Bao-yu. 'in future you will be called

Four". We're not going to have any more of these floral fragrances around here. It's an insult to decent scents and flowers to give their names to you lot?'

Then he asked her to pour him some tea.

Listening attentively in the outer room, 'Flowers' Aroma and her Musky ally—for whose ears this gibe was intended—were nearly bursting themselves in their efforts not to laugh.

All that day Bao-yu stayed in his own room, seeing no one. It was gloomy on his own, with nothing but reading

and a little writing for amusement, but he refused to make use of any of his usual attendants and would have only "Number Four" to wait on him. Though he did not realize it, she was a designing little minx and endeavoured by every artifice at her command to get her hooks into him while she had the chance.

After dinner Bao-yu came back flushed and slightly tipsy, having taken a few cups of wine with his meal. Normally this would have been the occasion for an evening of hilarity with Aroma and the rest, but today he would have to sit by his lamp alone in cheerless isolation. The prospect was a depressing one. Yet if he were to go running after her, it would seem too much like a capitulation, and her nagging would thenceforth become insufferable. On the other hand, to frighten her into some sort of compliance by asserting his mastery over her would be heartless. There was nothing else for it: he would just have to grin and bear it.

'Suppose they were all dead,' he said to himself. 'I should have to make do on my own *somehow* or other!'

The thought was strangely comforting. He was able to stop worrying. He even began to feel quite cheerful. Having instructed Number Four to trim up the lamp and brew him a pot of tea, he settled down to a volume of *Zhuang-zi*. Presently he came to the following passage in the chapter called 'Rifling Trunks':

Away then with saints and wise men, and the big thieves will cease from despoiling. Discard your jades, destroy your pearls, and the little thieves will cease from pilfering. Burn your tallies, smash your seals, and the common people will revert to their natural integrity. Break all the bushels and snap a~ the steelyards, and they will have no further grounds for dispute. Obliterate those 'sacred laws' by which the world is governed, and you will find yourself at last able to reason with them. If you confuse the pitch pipes, break up the organs, unstring the zithers and stop up Shi Kuang's ears, people will begin to make proper use of their own hearing. if you abolish all intricacy of design and brilliancy of colouring and glue up Li Zhu's eyes, people will begin to make proper use of their own eyesight. And if you destroy your arcs and lines, throw away your compasses and set-squares and break the fingers of Chui the Cunning, people will begin to make proper use of their own skill…

The words wonderfully suited his present mood. He read no further. Impulsively picking up a writing-brush, and with the inspiration lent him by his tipsiness, he added the following lines in the margin:

Away then with Musk and Aroma, and the female tongue will cease from nagging. Discard Bao-chai's heavenly beauty, destroy Dai-yu's divine intelligence, utterly abolish all tender feelings, and the female heart will cease from envy. If the female tongue ceases from nagging there will be no further fear of quarrels and estrangements; if Bao-chai's heavenly beauty is discarded there will be no further grounds for tender admiration; and if Dai-yu's divine intelligence is destroyed there will be no further cause for romantic imaginings. These Bao-chais, Dai-yus, Aromas and Musks spread their nets and dig their pits, and all the world are bewitched and ensnared by them.

Having written these lines, he threw down the brush and went straight to bed.

He was asleep almost as soon as his head touched the pillow and remained dead to the world throughout the whole of that night. Waking with the first light next morning, he sat up in bed to find Aroma lying fully clothed beside him outside the covers. He roused her with a gentle shake, all yesterday's unpleasantness now quite forgotten:

'Go to bed properly! You'll get cold, sleeping like that!'

Aroma had not, on the day previous to this, openly criticized Bao-yu for disporting himself at all hours of the day and night with his girl cousins because she knew from experience that criticism was powerless to change him. To alert him to the error of his ways she had instead adopted a more passive approach. She had confidently expected this new method to produce a speedy repentance, followed by a swift return to normal relations; so that when, contrary to her expectation, a whole day went by without his having manifested the looked-for change of

heart, she was left with no further resources, and as a consequence had been too worried to sleep properly for the greater part of that night.

But now here he was addressing her normally once more. He must have undergone a change of heart during the night. She forced herself to ignore him still, in order to drive the lesson home.

Meeting with no response, Bao-yu reached out his hand to help her get undressed; but he had got no further than undoing the first button when she pushed his hand away and did it up again. He was at a loss to know what to do with her. With a gentle smile he took her by the hand:

'Now - what's the matter?'

He had to repeat the question several times. She fixed her eyes on him angrily:

'Nothing's the matter. But now you're awake, hadn't you better hurry over to the other place to get washed? If you delay much longer, you might not be in time.'

'What other place?' said Bao-yu.

Aroma smiled coldly.

'Why ask me? How should *I* know? Go wherever you like for your toilet! Let's make a clean break from now on, you and I, and perhaps we'll have a bit less of all this bickering and making ourselves ridiculous in front of the others. I mean to say, even if you get tired of going *there*, you've always got your Number Fours and Number Fives back here to wait on you.

But as for the rest of us: even our names are "an insult to decent scents and flowers"!'

Bao-yu laughed:

'Do you still remember that?'

'I'll remember that if I live to be a hundred I' said Aroma. 'I'm not like you: treating everything *I* say like so much wind and forgetting in the morning what you said yourself the night before!'

There was something about her pretty face suffused with anger that Bao-yu found infinitely touching. He snatched up a lade hairpin that was lying beside the pillow and snapped it in two.

'So be it with me if I ever fail to listen to you again!' he said.

What a way to carry on at this hour of the morning!' said Aroma, hurriedly picking up the pieces. 'Whether you listen to me or not is up to you. There's no need to get into such a state about it!'

'You don't know how worried you make me,' said Bao-yu.

'*So you* feel worried, do you?' said' Aroma smiling. 'Now perhaps you'll have some idea what *I* feel like most 6f the time! –Come on, let's get washed!'

With that the two of them got up and began their toilet. Later, after Bao-yu had gone off to the front apartment, Dai-yu looked in unexpectedly, and not finding Bao-yu in, began idly turning over the books that were lying on his desk. Chancing to light on the volume of *Zhuang-zi* that he had been reading the night before, her eye was drawn to the lines he had written in the margin. They both vexed and amused her, and she could not resist picking up a writing-brush and adding the following quatrain on the remaining blank space:

What wretch would here, with scurrile pen,
The text of *Zhuang-zi* plagiarize,
And, heedless of his own great faults,
Fright others with his wicked lies?

That done, she went to the front apartment to see Grandmother Jia, and from there on to Lady Wang's.

*

She found everyone at Lady Wang's in a great to-do. Xi-feng's baby daughter was ill. The doctor had been called and had just finished taking her pulses.

'Convey my congratulations to Her Ladyship and Mrs Lian'—the doctor's diagnosis was couched in the strange language which custom decrees in such cases—'I am happy to inform them that the little girl's sickness is the small-pox!'

Lady Wang and Xi-feng at once sent back to inquire whether the child was in any danger. The doctor made the following reply:

'Variola is, of course, a dangerous disease, but provided there are no complications, most cases of it are recuperable. Let the ladies lay in a plentiful supply of *sanguis caudae*, or pig's tail blood, and plenty of essence of mulberry-worm. Applied externally these will ensure a satisfactory development of the pustules.'

Xi-feng immediately became very busy. A room had to be swept out and prepared for the worship of the Smallpox Goddess. Orders had to be given to the servants to avoid the use of all fried and sautéed cookery. Patience had to be told to move Jia Lian's clothes and bedding to a room outside -for sexual abstinence, too, was enjoined on the parents of the sufferer. A length of dark-red cloth had to be procured and made up into a dress for the child by the combined labours of the nurses, maids and female relations most closely associated with it. Finally, a ritually purified room had to be made ready for the two doctors who would take it in turns to examine the little patient and make up her medicines, and who would not be permitted to return to their own homes until the customary period of twelve days had elapsed. These arrangements having been completed, Jia Lian went off to the outer study which was from now on to be his bedroom, while Xi-feng and Patience joined Lady Wang in the daily worship and propitiation of the Smallpox Goddess.

Jia Lian was the sort of man who will begin getting up to mischief the moment he takes leave of his wife. After only a couple of nights sleeping on his own he began to find abstinence extremely irksome and was reduced to slaking his fires on the more presentable of his pages. But other relief was at hand.

Among the domestic staff at the Rong-guo mansion was a certain drunken, dilapidated cook, by surname Duo, who, because of his weakness of character and general uselessness, had acquired the nickname of 'Droopy Duo'. Two years previous to this date Droopy's father had provided him with a wife. She was now just turned twenty, a fine, good4ooking young wanton, always eager to throw herself at whatever partners opportunity might place in her way. Droopy Duo raised no objection to her infidelities. As long as he had meat to eat and wine to drink and money in his pocket he saw no reason to concern himself about anything else. Consequently there was scarcely an able-bodied male in the Ning-guo and Rong-guo mansions who had not at one time or another sampled her wares. Because of her pneumatic charms and omnivorous promiscuity this voluptuous young limmer was referred to by all and sundry as 'the Mattress'.

Jia Lian, now separated from the wife of his bosom and fairly frying with unsatisfied desires, had for some time past been aware of the Mattress's charms; but though his mouth had long watered to enjoy them, what with fear of his jealous young wife on the one hand and fear of his fancy boys on the other, he had so far found no opportunity of approaching her.

The Mattress, too, had for some time past had her eye on Jia Lian, and it was a source of regret to her that he had so far proved unapproachable. Learning that he had now moved to his study outside, she managed to find excuses for passing by that way three or four times in a day, provoking Jia Lian to a pitch of frantic eagerness only to be compared with that of a starving rat confronted by some food. He was obliged to seek the advice of his pages and to promise them rich rewards if they could procure her for his pleasure. The pages were ready enough to oblige—the more so as they were themselves old customers of hers - and the request for an assignation was no sooner made than granted.

At about ten o'clock that night, when all were abed and Droopy Duo lay collapsed on the kang in drunken

slumbers, Jia Lian slipped noiselessly into the room for his pre-arranged meeting with the Mattress. The mere sight of her proved so potent a stimulant that without wasting any time on tender preliminaries, he took down his trousers and set to work at once.

Now this wife of Duo's had a physical peculiarity which was that as soon as the man's body came into contact with her own she felt a delicious melting sensation invading her limbs, rendering her body soft and yielding to that of her partner, so that he had the impression of lying on a heap of down; and in addition to this natural endowment she knew more tricks of posture and more ways of exciting a man with murmured lewdnesses and amorous cries than a professional prostitute.

As Jia Lian lay on top of her, wishing he could melt into her body from sheer excess of pleasure, she began to exercise this last accomplishment.

'Your little girl's got the smallpox,' she murmured. 'While they're worshipping the Goddess, you are supposed to keep yourself pure. Naughty man! You're making yourself unclean because of me. You must leave me! Go away!'

Jia Lian's movements became more violent.

'You are my only goddess!' he said, panting heavily. 'I care for no other goddess but you!'

At this the Mattress began to grow even more reckless in her incitements and Jia Lian to reveal the more disgusting of his sexual accomplishments.

They lay a long time together when it was over, exchanging oaths and promises, unable to break apart. From that day onwards there was a secret understanding between them.

A day arrived when the smallpox poison had spent itself and Baby's pustules showed signs of drying up. After the twelfth day the Smallpox Goddess was ceremoniously ushered off the premises, the entire family joined in a service of thanksgiving to Heaven and the ancestors, and there was much burning of incense in discharge of vows made on the child's behalf by various of its members, and much exchanging of congratulations and paying out of rewards. When all this was over, Jia Lian returned once more to the matrimonial couch. 'A night after absence is better than a wedding night' as the proverb crudely puts it, and certainly the affection shown that night by Jia Lian for his lady was of more than usual intensity.

Early next morning, when Xi-feng had gone off to Grand-mother Jia's, Patience began putting away the clothes and bedding that had been brought in from the outer study. To her surprise she felt something strange in the cover of Jia Lian's head-rest, and after groping inside it, fished out a black, silky tress of woman's hair. Quick to understand its significance, she hid it in her sleeve and going across to the other room, showed it to Jia Lian and asked him what it was.

As soon as he saw the hair, Jia Lian rushed forward to snatch it from her. She darted away, but he seized hold of her, and forcing her on to the kang, attempted to wrest it from her grasp.

'Mean thing!' said Patience. 'After I've gone to the trouble of asking you about it behind her back, you have to start being rough!'

Just at that moment they heard Xi-feng coming. Jia Lian didn't know whether to let go of Patience or make a final effort to obtain the hair. Finally, with a muttered entreaty, he released her:

'Angel! Don't let her know!'

Patience managed to get up just as Xi-feng was entering.

'Quick!' said Xi-feng. 'Open up the chest and find that pattern for Her Ladyship!'

'Yes madam,' said Patience.

While Patience was looking for the pattern, Xi-feng caught sight of Jia Lian and suddenly thought of something else.

'Have we got the things back from the outer study yet?'

'Yes,' said Patience.

'Was there anything missing?'

‘No,’ said Patience. ‘I went through them very carefully, but there was nothing missing.’

‘Was there anything there that *shouldn’t* have been?’

Patience laughed.

‘Isn’t it enough that there was nothing missing? Why should there be anything extra?’

Xi-feng laughed, too.

‘He was nearly a fortnight outside. I wouldn’t bank on his having kept himself clean all that time. There might have been something left behind by one of his little friends: a ring or a sash or something.’

Jia Lian turned pale with fright. He grimaced piteously at Patience from behind Xi-feng’s back, and drawing a finger across his throat, silently entreated her to keep her discovery hidden.

Patience affected not to notice him.

‘It’s funny you should say that, Mrs Lian. Exactly the same thought occurred to me; but though I went through his things very carefully, I didn’t find anything suspicious. If you don’t believe me, you can have a look yourself.’

‘Silly girl!’ said Xi-feng. ‘Do you imagine that if there were really anything there he would *let* us look?’

And taking the pattern from her she went out again. Patience pointed a finger at her own nose and wagged her head from side to side.

‘How are you going to thank me for that?’

‘You’re a sweet little darling!’

He beamed delightedly and lunged forward to embrace her. Patience dangled the hair in front of him:

‘You’ll have to watch your step from now on,’ she said. ‘Now I’ve got something to keep you in order with. If you misbehave...!’

‘All right, you look after it, then. But’ - his tone became en-treating - ‘don’t, whatever you do, let her find out!’

He said this to put her off her guard. As soon as her defences were relaxed he made a quick grab and snatched it from her.

‘Perhaps you’d better not have it, after all,’ he said with a grin of triumph. ‘If I have it I can burn it, and then it’s all over and done with.’

He stowed the hair in the side of his boot as he said this. Patience clenched her teeth in anger.

‘You’re *mean!* Burn the bridge when you’re safely over the river - that’s your way, isn’t it? All right then, you needn’t expect me to tell lies for you in future!’

In Jia Lian’s lascivious eyes her anger made her adorable. He felt himself becoming excited, and throwing his arms round her, he asked her to let him take her. But Patience struggled free and ran from the room, leaving him doubled up in a fury of frustrated desire.

‘Little cock-teaser!’ he shouted after her. ‘You deliberately provoked me, and now you run away!’

‘Who provoked you?’ Patience giggled from outside the window. ‘You shouldn’t be so randy! Do you expect me to make the Mistress hate me lust for the sake of making you feel comfortable?’

‘You needn’t worry about her,’ said Jia Lian. ‘One of these days when I get my temper up I’m going to lay into that jealous bitch and break every bone in her body. Then perhaps she’ll know who’s master round here. She watches me like a bloody thief. £*he* can talk to men when she likes, but I’m not supposed to talk to women, oh no! If I’m talking to a woman and just happen to get a bit close, she immediately starts suspecting something. But if *she* wants to go chattering and larking around with Bao or Rong or any other bloody male on the premises, that’s supposed to be all right! You wait! One of these days I’ll stop her seeing anyone at all!’

‘She’s every right to watch you,’ said Patience, ‘and *you*’ve no right at all to be jealous of *her*. She’s always been perfectly straight and above board where men are concerned; but you —whatever you do you’ve got something nasty in mind! You make even *me* worried, never mind about her!’

‘Oh, shut up! ‘ said Jia Lian. ‘You’re all perfect, aren’t you? It’s just me that’s always up to something nasty! One of these days I’ll make a clean sweep of the lot of you!’

Just at that moment Xi-feng stepped into the courtyard and saw Patience standing outside the window.

‘If you want to talk,’ she said, ‘why not talk inside the room? What’s the idea of running outside and bawling through the window ?’

‘Don’t ask *her!’* said Jia Lian’s voice from inside. ‘She thinks there’s a tiger in the room and she’s afraid of being eaten!’

‘He’s in there on his own,’ said Patience. ‘What should I be doing in there with him?’

‘All the more reason for being in there, I should have thought, if he’s on his own,’ said Xi-feng, smiling rather spitefully.

‘Is that remark intended for me?’ said Patience.

‘Who else?’ said Xi-feng.

‘You’ll make me say something I shall feel sorry for in a minute,’ said Patience; and instead of standing aside and raising the door-blind for her mistress, she entered ahead of her, dropped it rudely in her face, and marched angrily through the sitting-room to one of the rooms at the back.

‘What’s the matter with Patience? The girl’s gone mad!’ said Xi4eng when she had raised the blind again and let herself in. ‘I really do believe she is trying to displace me. You’d better look out, my friend: I’ll have the hide off you!’

‘Bravo! Good for Patience!’ said Jia Lian, who had retreated on to the kang and was applauding the comedy from that safer eminence. ‘I didn’t know she had it in her. In future I shall take that girl more seriously.’

‘It’s you who’ve let her get above herself,’ said Xi-feng. ‘I hold you directly responsible for this!’

‘Oh no!’ said Jia Lian. ‘If you two want to quarrel, I’m not going to stand between you and take all the knocks, I’m getting out of here!’

‘I’m sure I don’t know where you think you’ll go to,’ said Xi-feng.

‘Don’t you worry, I’ve got somewhere to go to,’ said Jia Lian, and he began to go; but Xi-feng stopped him.

‘No, don’t go! There’s something else I want to talk to you about.’

But if you want to know what it was, you will have to wait for the next chapter.

CHAPTER 22

Bao-yu finds Zen enlightenment
in an operatic aria
And Jia Zheng sees portents of doom in
lantern riddles

Hearing that Xi-feng wanted to consult him about some-thing, *Jia* Lian halted and asked her what it was.

‘It’s Bao-chai’s birthday on the twenty-first,’ said Xi-feng. ‘What do you think we ought to do about it?’

‘How should I know?’ said Jia Lian. ‘You’ve managed plenty of big birthday celebrations before in your time. Why have you become so helpless all of a sudden?’

‘There are fixed rules for everything when you are planning a big grown-up celebration,’ said Xi-feng; ‘but in Bao-chai’s case she’s neither exactly grown-up nor exactly a child any longer. That’s why I wanted your advice.’

Jia Lian lowered his head and thought for a moment.

‘Why, you’re being stupid!’ he said presently. ‘There’s a precedent right in front of you. What about Dai-yu? All you’ve got to do is find what arrangements you made in the past for her and do exactly the same for Bao-chai now.’

‘Do you suppose I didn’t think of that?’ said Xi-feng with scorn. ‘I’m not *that* stupid! The point is that yesterday, because of something Grandma said, I started asking them all their birthdays and ages, and it seems that on this birthday of hers on the twenty-first Bao-chai is going to be fifteen. Now that doesn’t qualify for a full-scale celebration, but it *is* a sort of corning-of-age, and when Grandma heard about it she said she wanted to sponsor something for it herself. So obviously, whatever we do, it can’t be quite the same as what we’ve done in the past for Dai-yu.’

‘Well in that case,’ said Jia Lian, ‘take what you did for Dai-yu as a basis and just add on a bit.’

‘That’s what I’d thought of doing,’ said Xi-feng; ‘but I wanted to see what you thought before doing anything de unite, because I didn’t want to go adding extras on my own initiative and then have you complaining that you hadn’t been properly consulted.’

‘You can cut that out!’ said Jia Lian—though not ill humouredly. ‘You know you don’t really mean a word of it! Just stop snooping on me all the time, that’s all I ask. You won’t hear any complaints from me then about not being consulted!’

With that he walked off: but whither, or to whom, our narrative does not disclose,

It tells us instead that Shi Xiang-yun, having spent a considerable part of the New Year holiday with the Jias, was now on the point of returning home, but was urged by Grandmother Jia to wait for Bao-chai’s birthday and not go back until she had seen the plays. Xiang-yun agreed to stay and sent someone home with instructions to tell them that she would be returning a little later than planned and to fetch a couple of pieces of her own embroidery that she could give to Bao-chai as a birthday-present.

Ever since Bao-chai’s first arrival, Grandmother Jia had been pleasurably impressed by her placid and dependable disposition, and now that she was about to spend her first ‘big’ birthday in the Jia household, the old lady resolved to make it a memorable one. Taking twenty taels of silver from her private store, she summoned Xi-feng and directed her to spend it on providing wine and plays for a celebration. Xi-feng made this the occasion for a little raillery.

‘If the old lady says she wants her grandchild’s birthday celebrated,’ she said, ‘then celebrated it must be, and we must all jump to it without arguing! But if she’s going to start asking for *plays* as well, all I can say to that is that if she’s in the mood for a bit of fun, I’m afraid she’s going to have to pay for it. She’s going to have to cough up something out of those private savings of hers she’s been hoarding all these years -not wait until the last minute and then fish out a measly little twenty taels to pay for the party: that’s just another way of telling us we’ve got to pay for it ourselves. I mean, if you were really hard up, it would be another matter: but you’ve got boxes and boxes of boodle—the bottoms are dropping out of them, they’re so fall! It’s pure meanness, that’s what it is! You forget, Grannie, when you go to heaven young Bao-yu won’t be the only one who’ll walk ahead of the hearse. You’ve got other grandchildren too, don’t forget! You don’t have to leave *every thing* to him. The rest of us may not be much use, but you mustn’t be *too* hard on us. Twenty taels! Do you really think that’s enough to pay for a party *and plays?’*

At this point the entire company burst into laughter, which Grandmother Jia joined in herself.

‘just listen to her!’ she said. ‘I thought *I* had a fairly sharp tongue, but I’m no match for *this* one: “Clack-clack, clack-clack”—it’s worse than a pair of wooden clappers! Even your mother-in-law daren’t argue with *me*, my dear! Don’t pick on *me!’*

‘Mother-in-law is just as soppy about Bao-yu as you are,’ said Xi-feng. ‘I’ve got no one to tell my troubles to. And you say I’m sharp-tongued I’

Xi-feng’s mock-lugubriousness set the old lady off in another squall of laughter. She loved to be teased, and

Xi-feng's bantering put her in great good humour.

That night, when the young folk had finished paying their evening duty and were standing round her laughing and talking a while before retiring to their own apartments, Grandmother Jia asked Bao-chai what sort of plays she liked hest and what her favourite dishes were. Bao-chai was well aware that her grandmother, like most old women, enjoyed the livelier, more rackety sort of plays and liked sweet and pappy things to eat, so she framed her answers entirely in terms of these preferences. The old lady was delighted.

Next day presents of clothing and various other objects, to which Lady Wang, Xi-feng, Dai-yu and the rest had all contributed, were sent round to Bao-chai's. Our narrative supplies no details.

At last the twenty-first arrived. A dear little stage had been erected in the courtyard outside Grandmother Jia's apartment and a newly trained troupe of child actors able to perform both *Kun-qu* and the noisier *Yi-qiang* type of plays had been engaged. In the apartment's main sitting-room a semicircle of little tables were arranged facing outwards towards the stage and laid in preparation for a feast. No outsiders were invited. The guests of honour were Aunt Xue, Shi Xiang-yun and Bao-chai herself, All the others invited were members of the family.

Early that morning Bao-yu, not seeing Dai-yu around, went to look for her in her room and found her still reclining on the kang.

'Get up and have something to eat!' he said. 'The players will be starting shortly. Tell me some play you like so that I shall know which one to choose!,

'If you're so anxious to please me,' said Dai-yu coldly, 'you ought to hire a troupe specially and put on all my favourites. It's a cheap sort of kindness to treat me at someone else's expense!'

'Never mind!' said Bao-yu. 'When we hire a troupe for you, you'll be able to return the compliment.'

He hauled her up from the kang, and the two of them went off hand in hand together.

As soon as they had eaten, it was time to talk about chousing the plays and Grandmother Jia called on Bao-chai to begin. Bao-chai made a show of declining; but it was her birthday, and in the end she gave in and selected a piece about Monkey from *The Journey to the West.* Grandmother Jia was pleased.

Aunt Xue was now invited to pick a play, but as her own daughter had just chosen, she refused. Grandmother Jia did not press her and passed on to Xi-feng. Xi-feng would normally have refused to take precedence over her aunt and mother-in-law, who were both present, but Grandmother had commanded and must be obeyed. As she happened to know that the old lady's partiality for lively plays was particularly strong in the case of those which had lots of jokes and clowning in them, she selected a piece entitled *Liu Er Pawns His Clothes* in order to make sure that this element was not lacking from the programme. As she had anticipated, Grandmother Jia was even more delighted by this second choice.

Next Dai-yu was asked to choose. She deferred to Aunt Xing and Aunt Wang; but Grandmother Jia was insistent:

'I've brought you young people here today for some fan,' she said. 'I want you to enjoy yourselves. Never mind about *them!* I didn't go to all this trouble just for *their* sakes! They are lucky to be here at all, having all this good food and entertainment for nothing: you surely don't think that *on top of that* I'm going to let them choose the plays?'

The others all laughed, and Dai-yu chose a play. Then Bao-yu, Shi Xiang-yun, Ying-chun, Tan-chun, Xi-chun and Li Wan each chose a play in turn, after which the little players proceeded to perform them in the order in which they had been selected.

When the time came to bring in the wine and begin the feast, Grandmother Jia invited Bao-chai to choose again. This time she asked for *Zhi-shen at the Monastery Gate.*

‘Why do you keep choosing plays like that?’ said Bao-yu.

‘To hear you talk, it doesn’t sound as if all your years of play-going have taught you much,’ said Bao-chai. ‘This is an excellent play, both from the point of view of the music and of the words.’

‘I can’t stand noisy plays,’ said Bao-yu. ‘I never could.’

‘If you call this a noisy play,’ said Bao-chai, ‘it *proves* that you don’t know what you’re talking about. Come over here and I’ll explain. This *Zhi-shen at the Monastery Gate* is a “Ruby Lips” sequence in the Northern mode. That means, musically speaking, that it is in a vigorous, somewhat staccato style. In fact the musical excellence of this piece goes without saying. But apart from that, the libretto is good, too. The words of Zhi-shen’s “Clinging Vine” aria, which is the last but one in the sequence, are particularly fine.’

Bao-yu was interested, drew his chair closer, and begged her to let him hear them. Lowering her voice so as not to disturb the others, she half-sang, half-recited them for his benefit:

‘I dash aside the manly teat
And take leave of my monkish home.
A word of thanks to you, my Master dear,
Who tonsured me before the Lotus Throne:
‘Twas not my luck to stay with you,
And in a short while I must say adieu,
Naked and friendless through the world to roam.
I ask no goods, no gear to take away,
Only straw sandals and a broken bowl,
To beg from place to place as best I may.’

Bao-yu listened enthralled tapping his knee and nodding his head in time to her singing. When she had done, he agreed enthusiastically about the excellence of the words and congratulated her on the extraordinary breadth of her knowledge.

‘Sh!’ said Dai-yu, looking round crossly in Bao-yu’s direction. ‘Can’t you be a bit quieter and attend to the play? This is *Zhi-shen at the Monastery Gate* we’re supposed to be listening to, not *Jing-de Acts the Madman I*

Xiang-yun found this very fanny.

They continued to watch plays until the evening. Grandmother Jia had taken a particular fancy to the little player who had acted the heroine’s parts and the one who had played the clown, and when the last performance was over, she asked for them to be brought in to see her. She found them very ‘sweet’ - even more so on a closer inspection - and asked them their ages. The leading lady turned out to be eleven and the clown only nine There were murmurs and exclamations from all present when they heard this, and Grandmother Jia told someone to give them delicacies from the table and a present of money each, in addition to what they would receive as members of the troupe.

Meanwhile Xi-feng appeared to be very much amused about something.

‘The way that child there is made-up makes him look so like someone we know,’ she said. ‘Haven’t any of you noticed?’

Bao-chai knew whom she was referring to, but merely nodded her head slightly without replying. Bao-yu, too, nodded, but did not dare to reply. Only Xiang-yun was tactless enough to say anything:

‘Oh, I know I’ she blurted out. ‘Like Cousin Lin, you mean?’

Bao-yu shot a quick glance in her direction; but it was too late. Xiang-yun's reply had prompted the others 'to look more carefully, with the result that they all instantaneously burst out laughing, so striking was the resemblance. Shortly after this the party broke up.

During the evening Xiang-yun ordered Kingfisher to start packing. Kingfisher remonstrated:

'What's the hurry? Why not wait till we're going? There'll be plenty of time before we go.'

'We're going first thing tomorrow,' said Xiang-yun. 'What's the point of staying any longer? You can see from the looks on their faces that we are not welcome here.'

Bao-yu chanced to overhear this remark and hurried in to her:

'You're wrong to be offended with me, coz. The others all know how sensitive Cousin Lin is, and they wouldn't answer because they were afraid of upsetting her. When you suddenly spoke up without realizing, I knew she was bound to be upset, and that's the reason why I looked at you like that. I was worried *for your* sake, because I was afraid she would be offended with you. *That you* should now get angry with me is really rather unfair. If it had been anyone else but you, I shouldn't have minded whether they offended her or not. I shouldn't have felt that much concern about them.'

Xiang-yun silenced him with an imperious wave of her hand:

'You can save your line speeches for someone else. They're wasted on me. Obviously I'm not in the same class as your Cousin Lin. It's all right for other people to laugh at her; but as soon as *I* say anything about her, I'm at once in the wrong. I'm not really worthy to speak about her at all. She's the young lady of the house. I'm only a little nobody I'

'I was only thinking of you,' said Bao-yu in great agitation, 'yet now you put me in the wrong. May I straightway turn into dust and be trodden beneath ten thousand feet if I had any but the kindest intentions!'

'You are too glib with your ridiculous oaths,' said Xiang-yun. 'This is no time for swearing. You can keep that kind of talk for that sensitive, easily upset person you were talking about. She knows how to handle you. Don't try it on me: it makes me *thick!'*

With these words she walked off into the inner room of Grandmother Jia's apartment and lay down on the kang in a rage.

Very much out of countenance, Bao-yu went off to look for Dai-yu. She must have been waiting for him, for just as he was entering the room, she pushed him out again and shut the door. Totally at a loss to understand her behaviour, he called to her softly through the window:

'Dai, dear! Dai!'

But she took no notice.

Bao-yu stood there disconsolately, hanging his head in silence. Nightingale knew what was happening, but judged the time not ripe for her to intervene; so he continued to stand there like an idiot, until at last Dai-yu thought he must have gone back to his own room, and opened the door again. When she saw him still standing there, she had not the heart to shut the door on him a second time, and allowed him to follow her back into the room.

'There's always a reason for everything,' he said. 'If you tell people what it is, they don't feel so bad about it. You can't suddenly get angry with me for no reason whatever. What is all this about?'

'Don't ask *me!*, said Dai-yu coldly. *'I* don't know. I'm only a figure of fun - the sort of person you might compare with a child actor in order to get a good laugh from the others.'

'I never made the comparison,' said Bao-yu hotly, 'and I never laughed at you. Why should you be angry with *me?'*

‘You would *like* to have made the comparison; you would *like* to have laughed,’ said Dai-yu. “to me your way of no:
comparing and *not* laughing was worse than the others’ laughing and comparing!’

Bao-yu found this unanswerable.

‘However,’ Dai-yu went on, ‘*that* I could forgive. But whit about that look you gave Yun? Just what did you mean by that? I think I know what you meant. You meant to warn her that she would cheapen herself by joking with me as an equal. Because she’s an Honourable and her uncle’s a marquis and I’m only the daughter of a commoner, she mustn’t risk joking with me, because it would be so degrading for her if I were to answer back. That’s what you meant, isn’t it? Oh yes, you had the *kindest intentions.* Only unfortunately she didn’t *want* your kind intentions and got angry with you in spite of them. So you tried to make it up with her at my expense, by telling her how touchy J am and how easily I get upset. You were afraid she might offend me, were you? As if it were any business *of yours* whether she offended me or not) or whether or not I got angry with her I’

When Bao-yu heard her say this, he knew she must have overheard every word of his conversation with Xiang-yun. He reflected that he had only acted in the first place from a desire to keep the peace between them: yet the only outcome of his good intentions had been a telling-off by either party. It put him in mind of something he had read a day or two previously in *Zhuang-zi:*

The cunning waste their pains;
The wise men vex their brains;
But the simpleton, who seeks no gains,
With belly full, he wanders free
As drifting boat upon the sea.

and of another passage from the same book about timber trees inviting the axe and sweet springs being the cause of their own contamination. The more he thought about it, the more dejected he became.

‘If I can’t even get on with the few people I live with now,’ he asked himself, ‘how am I going to manage later on...?’

At that point in his reflections it seemed to him that there was no further point in arguing, and he turned to go back to his room.

Dai-yu realized that he must have thought of something upsetting to go off like this. But not to be answered was altogether too provoking. She felt the anger mounting inside her.

‘All right, go!’ she shouted after him. ‘And don’t ever come back! And don’t ever speak to me again!’

Bao-yu ignored her. He went straight back to his own room, threw himself on the bed, and lay staring at the ceiling. Aroma knew what the trouble was but dared not, for the time being at any rate, refer to it. She tried distracting him with talk of other matters.

‘I suppose there’ll be more plays after today, won’t there? Miss Bao is sure to give a return party, isn’t she?’

‘Whether she does or not,’ said Bao-yu, ‘what concern is it of mine?’

This was certainly not the sort of answer Aroma was used to getting. She tried again, smiling breezily:

‘That’s no way of looking at it! This is the New Year holidays, when their ladyships and the young ladies are all enjoying themselves. We can’t have you mooning around like this!’

‘Whether their ladyships and the young ladies are enjoying themselves or not,’ said Bao-yu, ‘what concern is it of mine?’

Aroma laughed.

‘Seeing that they’re all doing their best to be agreeable, couldn’t you try to do likewise? Surely it’s much better ail round if everyone will give and take a bit?’

‘What do you mean, “give and take a bit”?’ said Bao-yu in the same lack-lustre voice as before. ‘*They* can give and take a bit if they like. *My* destiny is a different one:

naked and friendless through the world to roam.’

A tear stole down his cheek as he recalled the line from the aria.

He continued to ponder its words and to savour their meaning, and ended up by bursting into tears and crying outright. Jumping up from the bed, he went over to his desk, took up a writing-brush, and wrote down the following lines in imitation of a Buddhist gatha:

I swear, you swear,
With heart and mind declare;
But our protest
Is no true test.
It would be best
Words unexpressed
To understand,
And on that ground
To take our stand.

After writing it, he was still not satisfied. Though now enlightened himself, he feared that someone reading his ~ might not be able to share his enlightenment. Accordingly, with the words of the ‘Clinging Vine’ aria still running in his head, he added another set of verses after it to explain his point. That done, he read the whole through to himself out loud, then, with a wonderful feeling of liberation, went to bed and fell fast asleep.

Curious to know the sequel to Bao-yu’s departure, Dai-yu, on the pretext of wanting to see Aroma about something, eventually came round herself to have a look. Aroma told her that Bao-yu was already in bed asleep. She was on the point of going back again when Aroma smilingly detained her:

‘Just a moment, Miss! There’s a note here. Would you like to see what it says?’

She handed her the sheet of paper containing Bao-yu’s gatha and the ‘Clinging Vine’ poem. Dai-yu could see that they must have been written under the influence of their recent quarrel and could not help feeling both amused by them and a little sorry. But all she said to Aroma was:

‘It’s only a joke. Nothing of any consequence.’

She took it with her back to her own room and showed it to Xiang-yun. Next day she showed it to Bao-chai as well. Bao-chai glanced at the second poem. This is what Bao-yu had written:

You would have been at fault, if not for me;
But why should I care if they disagree?
Free come, free go, let nothing bar or hold me!
No more I’ll sink and soar between gloom and elation,
Or endlessly debate the depth of our relation.
What was the point of all of that past pother?
When I look back on it, it seems scarce worth the bother,

Then she read the gatha. She laughed.

‘I’m afraid this is all *my* fault. It must have been that aria I told him about yesterday which started it all. Those Taoist writings and Zen paradoxes can so easily lead people astray if they do not understand them properly. I shall never forgive myself if he is going to start taking this sort of nonsense seriously and getting it fixed in his head. It will all be because of that aria!’

She tore the paper into tiny pieces and gave them to one of the maids:

‘Here, burn this - straight away!’

Dai-yu laughed at her.

You needn’t have torn it up. If you will both come with me and wait while I put a question to him, I can guarantee to drive this nonsense from his mind once and for all.’

The three girls went round to Bao-yu’s room together.

‘Bao-yu,’ said Dai-yu, addressing him in a heavily mock-serious manner, ‘I wish to propound a question to you: “*Bao*” is that which is of all things the most precious and “yu” is that which is of all things the most hard. Wherein lies your preciousness and wherein lies your hardness?’

Bao-yu was unable to think of an answer. The girls all laughed and clapped their hands.

‘Ha, ha, ha He can’t reply. For a student of Zen he does seem *remarkably* obtuse!’

‘You say in your *gatha,’* Dai-yu continued,

‘ “... It would be best
Words unexpressed
To understand,
And on that ground
To take our stand.”

Now that’s all right as far as it goes, but it doesn’t go far enough. I should like to add a few lines to it. Like this:

But, I perpend,
To have no ground
On which to stand
Were yet more sound.
And there’s an end!’

‘Ah, that’s better!’ said Bao-chai. ‘That sounds like a *real* “insight”. When the Sixth Patriarch Hui-neng first came to Shao-zhou looking for a teacher, he heard that the Fifth Patriarch Hong-ren was living at the monastery on **Yellow**-plum Mountain, so he found employment there in the monastery kitchen. When the Fifth Patriarch wanted to choose a successor, he ordered each of the monks to compose *agatha;* The Elder Shen-xiu recited this one:

“Our body like the Bo-tree is,
Our mind’s a mirror bright.
Then keep it clean and free from dust,
So it reflects the light!”

Hui-neng happened to be hulling rice in the kitchen at the time, and he shouted out, “That’s

not bad, but it's still not quite right." Then he recited this gatha of his own:

"No teal Bo-tree the body is,
The mind no mirror bright.
Since of the pair none's really there,
On what could dust alight?"

The Fifth Patriarch at once handed him his robe and bow] as a sign that he was to succeed him. Your improvement on Cousin Bao's gatha is on very much the same lines, Dai. There's just one thing, though: what about that "koan" of yours he couldn't answer? Surely you're not going to let him get away with it?'

'Failure to answer means defeat,' said Dai-yu. 'In any case, if he were to answer *now,* it would hardly count. The only condition I impose as victor is that he should henceforth be forbidden to talk any more about Zen. You see,' she told Bao-yu, 'even Bao-chai and I know more about it than you do. It's too ridiculous that you should set yourself up as a Zen authority!'

Bao-yu had in fact believed that he had attained an Enlightenment; but now suddenly here was Dai-yu propounding koans he couldn't answer and Bao-chai quoting with easy familiarity from the *Saying of the Patriarchs*—though neither had shown any evidence of these accomplishments in the past. It was clear that their understanding of these matters was far in advance of his own. He consoled himself with the reflection that if they, whose understanding was so superior, were manifestly still so far from Enlightenment, it was obviously a waste of time for *him* to go on pursuing it. Having reached this comfortable conclusion, he accepted Dai-yu's condition with a laugh:

'Who wants to be an authority on Zen? It was only a joke, any way!'

*

Just then it was announced that the Imperial Concubine had sent someone round from the Palace with a lantern-riddle which they were to try and guess. After they had guessed the answer, they were each to make up a riddle of their own and send it back to her.

As soon as they heard this, the four of them hurried to the reception room in Grandmother Jia's apartment, where they found a young eunuch with a square, flat-topped lantern of white gauze specially made for hanging riddles on. There was one hanging on it already which they crowded round to read while the eunuch gave them their instructions:

'When the young ladies have guessed, will they please not tell anyone the answer, but write it down secretly. The answers will be collected and taken back to the Palace in a sealed envelope so that Her Grace can see for herself who has guessed correctly.'

Bao-chai went up to the lantern and looked at the riddle, which was in the form of a quatrain. It was not a particularly ingenious one, but she felt obliged to praise it, and therefore remarked that it was hard to guess' and pretended to have to think about the answer, though in truth it had been obvious to her at a glance. Bao-yu, Dai-yu, Xiang-yun and Tan-chun had also guessed the answer and were busy writing it down. Presently Jia Huan and Jia Lan were summoned, and they too wrote something down after a good deal of puzzling. After that everyone made up a riddle about some object of their choice, wrote it out in the best *kai-shu* on a slip of paper, and hung it on the lantern, which was then taken away by the eunuch.

Towards evening the eunuch returned and reported what the Imperial Concubine had had to say about the results:

'Her Grace's own riddle was correctly guessed by everyone except Miss Ying and Master Huan. Her Grace has thought of answers to all the riddles sent her by the young ladies and gentlemen, but she does not know whether or not they are correct.'

He showed them the answers written down. Some were right and some were wrong, but even those whose riddles had been incorrectly answered deemed it prudent to pretend that the answers they had received were the right ones.

The eunuch proceeded to distribute prizes for answering the Imperial Concubine's riddle. Everyone who had guessed correctly received an ivory note-case made by Palace craftsmen and a bamboo tea-whisk. Ying-chun and Jia Huan were the only ones who did not receive anything. Ying-chun treated the matter as a joke and rapidly dismissed it from her mind, but Jia Huan was very much put out. To make matters worse, the eunuch went on to query Jia Huan's own riddle:

'Her Grace says that she has not answered Master Huan's riddle because she could not make any sense of it. She told me to bring it back and ask him what it means.'

Intrigued, the others crowded round to look. This is what Jia Huan had written:

'Big brother with eight sits all day on the bed;
Little brother with two sits on the roof's head.'.

There was a loud laugh when they had finished reading it. Jia Huan told the eunuch the answer: a head-rest and a ridge-end. The eunuch made a note of it and, after taking tea, departed once more.

Fired with enthusiasm by Yuan-chun's example, old Lady Jia decided to hold a riddle party. A very elegant lantern in the form of a three4eaved screen was hurriedly constructed on her orders and set up in the hall. When that had been done, she told all the boys and girls to make up a riddle - being carefal to keep the answers to themselves - write it on a slip of paper, and stick it on her lantern-screen. Then, having prepared the best fragrant tea to drink, a variety of good things to eat, and lots of little gifts to serve as prizes, she was ready to begin. Jia Zheng observed the old lady's excitement when he got back from Court and came along himself in the evening to join in the fun.

There were three tables. Grandmother Jia, Jia Zheng, Bao-yu and Jia Huan sat at the table on the kang, while below, Lady Wang, Bao-chai, Dai-yu and Xiang-yun sat at one table and Ying-chun, Tan-chun and Xi-chun at another. The floor below the kang was thronged with old women and maids in attendance. Li Wan and Xi-feng had a table to themselves in an inner room.

'Where's my little Lan?' said Jia Zheng, not seeing Jia Lan at any of the tables.

One of the serving-women went into the inner room to ask Li Wan. She rose to reply out of respect for her father-in-law:

'He refuses to come because he says his Grandpa Zheng hasn't invited him.'

The others were much amused when the woman relayed this answer back to Jia Zheng.

'He's a stubborn little chap when he's made his mind up!' they said. But they thought none the worse of him for that.

Jia Zheng quickly sent Jia Huan with two of the old women to fetch him. When he arrived, Grandmother Jia made him squeeze up beside her on her side of the table and gave him a handful of nuts and dried fruits to eat.

The little boy's presence provided the company with something to laugh and talk about. But not for long. Bao-yu, who normally did most of the talking on occasions like this, was today reduced by his father's presence to saying no more than 'yes' and 'no' to remarks made by other people. As for the rest: Xiang-yun, in spite of her sheltered upbringing, was normally an animated, not to say indefatigable talker, but this evening she too seemed to have been afflicted with dumbness by Jia Zheng's presence; Dai-yu was at the best of times unwilling to say very much in company from a sort of aristocratic lethargy which was a part of her nature; and Bao-chai, whose punctilious correctness made her always sparing in the use of words, even though on this occasion she Was probably the least uncomfortable of those present, said little to advance the conversation. As a consequence, what should have been a jolly, intimate family party was painfully unnatural and restrained.

Grandmother Jia knew as well as everyone else that this state of affairs was entirely owing to Jia Zheng's presence, and after the wine had gone round for the third time, she attempted to drive him off to bed. Jia Zheng, for his part, was perfectly well aware that he was being driven away so that the younger people could feel freer to enjoy themselves and, smiling forcedly, appealed against his banishment:

'When they told me earlier today that you were planning to give a riddle party, I specially prepared a contribution to the feast so that I might come and loin you. You have so much affection for your grandchildren, Mama. Can you not spare just a tiny bit for your son?'

Grandmother Jia laughed:

'They can't talk naturally while you are here. All you are doing is making it gloomy for *me*. I can't abide it. Well, if you've come to answer riddles, I'll give you a riddle. But if you can't guess the answer, you will have to pay me a forfeit.'

'Yes, of course,' said Jia Zheng eagerly. 'And if I guess right, I shall expect to be given a prize.'

'Of course,' said Grandmother Jia. 'The monkey's tail reaches from tree-top to ground. It's the name of a fruit.'

Jia Zheng knew that the answer to this hoary old chestnut was 'a longan' (long 'un), but pretended not to, and made all kinds of absurd guesses, each time incurring the obligation to pay his mother a forfeit, before finally giving the right answer and receiving the old lady's prize. Then he propounded a riddle of his own for her:

'My body's square,
Iron-hard am I.
I speak no word,
But words supply.

—It's a useful object.'

He whispered the answer to Bao-yu, who, readily understanding what was expected of him, surreptitiously passed it on to Grandmother Jia. The old lady, having thought for a bit and decided that it sounded all right, said:

'An inkstone.'

'Bravo, Mamma! Right first time 1' said Jia Zheng, and turning round to address the servants, he asked them to bring in the presents for Lady Jia. There was an answering call from the women below, and presently a number of them came forward bearing trays and boxes of various shapes and sizes which they handed up onto the kang. Grandmother Jia examined them one by one. They all contained traditional Lantern Festival presents, but in new

and exquisite designs and of the very highest quality. The old lady was obviously pleased.

'Come, children!' she commanded jovially. 'Give the Master a drink!'

Bao-yu stood up and poured wine from the wine-kettle into a little cup and Ying-chun handed it ceremoniously to her uncle.

'Have a look at the riddles on the screen,' said Grandmother Jia when Jia Zheng, with equal ceremony, had drained the cup. 'They were all made up by the children. See if you can tell me the answers.'

Jia Zheng rose from his seat and went up to the lantern-screen. The first riddle he saw was Yuan-chun's:

At my coming the devils turn pallid with wonder.
My body's all folds and my voice is like thunder.
When, alarmed by the sound of my thunderous crash,
You look round, I have already turned into ash.
An object of amusement.

'Would that be a firework?' said Jia Zheng.

'Yes,' said Bao-yu.

Jia Zheng looked again, this time at Ying-chun's:

Man's works and heaven's laws I execute.
Without heaven's laws, my workings bear no fruit.
Why am I agitated all day long?
For fear my calculations may be wrong.
A useful object.

'An abacus?'

There was a laugh from Ying-chun:

'Yes.'

The next riddle was Tan-chun's:

In spring the little boys look up and stare
To see me ride so proudly in the air.
My strength all goes when once the bond is parted,
And on the wind I drift off broken-hearted.
An object of amusement.

'It looks as if that ought to be a kite', said Jia Zheng.

'Yes,' said Tan-chun

The next riddle he looked at was Dai-yu's:

At court levée my smoke is in your sleeve:
Music and beds to other sorts I leave.
With me, at dawn you need no watchman's cry,

At night no maid to bring a fresh supply.
My head burns through the night and through the day,
And year by year my heart consumes away.
The precious moments I would have you spare:
But come fair, foul, or fine, I do not care.
A useful object.

'That must be an incense-clock.'
Bao-yu answered for her:
'Yes.'
Jia Zheng looked at the next riddle:

Southward you stare,
He'll northward glare.
Grieve, and he's sad.
Laugh, and he's glad.
A useful object.

'Very good!' said Jia Zheng. 'If the answer is "a mirror", it is a very good riddle.'
Bao-yu laughed:
'That *is* the answer.'
'Who is it by?' said Jia Zheng. 'There is no name on it.'
'I expect that one is by Bao-yu,' said Grandmother Jia.
Jia Zheng said nothing and passed on to the next one in silence. It was by Bao-chai:

My 'eyes' cannot see and I'm hollow inside.
When the lotuses surface, I'll be by your side.
When the autumn leaves fall I shall bid you adieu,
For our marriage must end when the summer is through.
A useful object.

Jia Zheng knew that the answer must be 'a bamboo wife', as they call those wickerwork cylinders which are put between the bedclothes in summertime to make them cooler; but a growing awareness that all the girls' verses contained images of grief and loss was by now so much affecting him that he felt quite unable to go on.

'Enough is enough!' he thought. 'What can it be that makes these innocent young creatures *all* produce language that is so tragic and inauspicious? It is almost as if they were all destined to be unfortunate and short-lived and were unconsciously foretelling their destiny.'

The gloom into which this reflection plunged him was evident in the melancholy expression on his face and in his bowed and dejected stance. Grandmother Jia noticed it but attributed it to fatigue. She feared that in this melancholy mood his continued presence would place an even greater restraint on the young folk's gaiety.

'I think you really *oughtn't* to stay,' she said. 'Why don't you go and lie down? The rest of us will sit up for a bit, but I don't expect we shall go on very much longer.'

'Yes,' said Jia Zheng, roused from his reverie by her voice. 'Yes, of course.'

But he forced himself to resume his former jovial manner and to drink another cup or two of wine with her before finally retiring. Back in his own apartment, he became lost in reverie once more; but whichever direction his thoughts took him in, he remained melancholy and troubled.

Meanwhile the party he had just left was proceeding somewhat differently.

'Now, my dears, you can enjoy yourselves!' Grandmother Jia said as soon as he had left the room; and the words were no sooner out of her mouth than Bao-yu leaped up from his seat and over to the screen and began criticizing the riddles on it - this one had a line wrong here—that one's words didn't suit the subject—pointing with his finger and capering about for all the world like a captive monkey that had just been let off its chain.

'Can't we sit down and enjoy ourselves quietly, as we were doing just now,' said Dai-yu, 'instead of all this prancing about?'

Xi-feng put in a word too, emerging from the inner room to say it:

'You ought to have Uncle Zheng with you every day and never budge an inch from his side!' She turned to the others: 'What a pity I didn't think of it at the time: we ought to have got Uncle to make him compose some more riddles for us. *Then* we should have seen him sweat!'

Bao-yu was greatly exasperated by this remark and tried to seize hold of her. Xi-feng tried to ward him off, and the result was that the two of them became locked in a sort of playful wrestling-match.

Grandmother Jia continued for a while to laugh and joke with Li Wan and the girls, but soon began to feel tired and sleepy. The night-drum was sounding, and when they stopped to listen they found it was already the beginning of the fourth watch. She ordered the food to be cleared away, telling the servants that they might have what was left over for themselves.

'Time for bed, children!' she said, rising to her feet. 'We can do this again tomorrow, if you like; but now we must have some sleep.'

With that the party gradually broke up and they all dispersed to their rooms.

What happened thereafter will be told in the following chapter.

CHAPTER 23

Words from the 'Western Chamber' supply
a joke that offends
And songs from the 'Soul's Return' move a
tender heart to anguish

Some time after her return from the Visitation the Imperial Concubine commissioned Tan-chun to make her a copy of all the poems about Prospect Garden that had been written during her visit, and having rearranged them in what she considered to be their order of merit, further instructed that they should be engraved on stone in the Prospect Garden itself—a lasting memorial to the precocious talent of her gifted family. in pursuance of these instructions, Jia Zheng ordered his people to look out the best craftsmen available to prepare and engrave the stone and delegated Cousin Zhen to supervise the work with Jia Rong and *Jia* Qiang as his lieutenants. As Jia Qiang proved to be fully occupied with his twelve young actresses—not to mention their costumes, properties and other paraphernalia—three other junior members of the clan, Jia Chang, Jia Ling and Jia Ping, were called into supervise the labour in his stead. In due course the preliminary stages of waxing, scratching and 'redding in' had commenced, and work on the memorial proceeded according to plan. We pass from this to other matters.

The twenty-four little Buddhist and Taoist nuns having now been moved out of the two miniature temples in the garden, Jia Zheng had been thinking of dispersing them among various temples and convents about the city, when a certain Zhou-shi, the widow of a poor relation of the Rong-guo Jias who lived near by in North Dukes Street, chanced to get wind of this matter and saw in it the possibility of some employment.

Zhou-shi had for some time past been meaning to ask Jia Zheng if he would find her boy Jia Qin a job—no matter how small a job as long as it would bring them in a little income—and now, hearing this news about the nuns, she drove incontinent forth to Xi-feng as fast as cab could carry her and besought her to use her influence on the boy's behalf.

Xi-feng had always found Zhou-shi a pleasant, unassuming sort of body and was disposed to help her. Having agreed to do so, and having rehearsed her line of approach, she went in to Lady Wang and broached the matter with her in the following manner.

'These little Buddhist and Taoist nuns,' she said, '—we definitely ought not to send them away. We shall need them again if Her Grace ever comes on another visit, and it will be a terrible job getting them together again if they have all been dispersed. If you ask me, the best thing would be to move them to the Temple of the Iron Threshold where they would still be under our control. It would only be a question of sending someone out there every month with a bit of money to pay for their housekeeping; then if there *is* ever any question of needing them again, we have only to say the word and they can be with us immediately without any trouble.'

The suggestion pleased Jia Zheng when it was in due course relayed to him by Lady Wang.

'Of course. That is just what we should do. I am glad you reminded me.'

From Jia Zheng a summons arrived for Jia Lian while he and Xi-feng were at dinner. He laid down his chopsticks and rose to go, but Xi-feng put a hand out and detained him:

'Not so fast! Listen to me I If it's anything else, never mind; but if it's about those little nuns.. '—and she went on to tell him exactly what he should say in that event and to impress on him how important it was that he should say it.

Jia Lian smiled and shook his head:

'Sorry, nothing doing! You'll have to ask him yourself-if you think you know how to!'

Xi-feng's back stiffened, She laid down her chopsticks and looked at Jia Lian. There was a glint in her eye and a dangerous little smile on her face when she spoke:

'Do you mean that, or are you joking ?'

'That boy of my cousin's widow who lives in West Lane, Jia Yun, has been on at me two or three times about getting him a job, and I promised to do something for him if he would wait. Now here at last a job comes along and, as usual, you want to snap it up yourself.'

'Don't worry I' said Xi-feng consolingly. 'Her Grace has mentioned that she wants a lot of planting done - pines and cypresses - in the north-east section of the garden, and she has also asked for more shrubs and flowers to be planted round the foot of the main hall. I promise you that as soon as that job comes up your Jia Yun shall be placed in charge of it.'

'Oh well, in that case all right,' said Jia Lian. 'Just one thing, though'—he dropped his voice and smiled at her slily —'Why did you keep pushing me off like that last night? I only wanted to try a change of position.

A quick flush overspread Xi-feng's face and she exploded in a little laugh. Then with a 'pshaw!' in his direction, she lowered her head again and went back to her meal.

Jia Lian laughed and slipped away. On entering Jia Zheng's presence he found that the subject was, as Xi-feng had anticipated, the arrangements for accommodating the little nuns, and he replied as Xi-feng had instructed him:

'Jia Qin is a promising young fellow. I think *he* could be entrusted with the job. In any case, he would be drawing the allowance from Accounts each month when all the other payments are made, so we should-be able to keep an eye on him.'

Jia Zheng never took much interest in these trivial domestic matters and agreed readily enough to Jia Lian's suggestion. The latter returned to his apartment and reported to Xi-feng. Xi-feng sent someone to inform Zhou-shi; and soon Jia Qin himself had arrived and was pouring out his gratitude to the two benefactors. With a show of conferring further favours, Xi-feng 'begged' Jia Lian to allow Jia Qin three months' payment in advance. A receipt was written for this amount and Jia Lian's seal affixed to it, and there and then Jia Qin was issued with a tally and sent to the counting-house to collect the money.

When the three hundred taels of shining silver had been weighed and counted and handed over, Jia Qin picked up a piece at random and tossed it to the cashiers to 'buy themselves a cup of tea with'. He had a boy to carry the money back home for him, and after taking counsel with his mother he hired a stout little donkey for himself to ride on and four or five covered mule-carts for the nuns, an~ conducting the carts round to the side gate of the Rong-guo mansion, he called forth the twenty-four little nuns and packed them all inside. Then off they set, with Jia Qin on his donkey at the head of the procession, to the Temple of the Iron Threshold outside the city. And there we leave them.

*

Yuan-chun's editing of the Prospect Garden poems had given her a vivid recollection of the garden's beauties. She was sure that her father, out of a zealous reverence for the Emperor and herself, would have kept it all locked and closed since her visit and would have allowed no one else to enter, and she felt this to be a waste and a shame—the more so when her family contained so many poetical young ladies who would have found inspiration in its scenery—not to mention the benefit their presence would have bestowed on the garden itself: for, as is well-known,

> When lovely woman smiles not,
> All Nature's charms ate dead.

Assuredly, the girls must be allowed into the garden. It should become their home. And if the girls, why not Bao-yu? He had grown up in their midst. He was different from other boys. If he were not allowed into the garden as well, he would consider himself left out in the cold, and his distress would cause Lady Wang and Grandmother Jia to feel unhappy too. Unquestionably she should ask for him to be admitted along with the girls. Having reached this decision, she summoned the eunuch Xia Bing-zhong and ordered him to convey the following Edict to Rong-guo House:

Bao-chai and the other young ladies of the household ate to reside in the Garden. The Garden is not to be kept closed. Bao-yu is to accompany the young ladies into the Garden and to continue his studies there.

The Edict was received by Jia Zheng and Lady Wang. When Xia Bing-zhong had gone, they reported it at once to Grandmother *Jia* and sent servants into the garden to sweep and prepare its buildings and rehang the blinds, portieres and bed-curtains in readiness for occupation.

No one was mote excited by the prospect of this move than Bao-yu. He was discussing it animatedly with Grandmother Jia (it was a discussion in which the words 'I want' recurred rather frequently) when suddenly a maid came in and announced that he was wanted by his father. At this bolt from the **blue** his countenance fell and all his animation drained away. Clinging to his grandmother with the gluey persistence of a toffee twist, he made it abundantly plain to her that he had no wish to obey. The old lady did her best to comfort him:

‘There, there, my lamb! You’d better go and see him. Grannie will see to it that he doesn’t hurt you. He wouldn’t dare. Besides, look at all those lovely poems you wrote: I expect that’s why Her Grace is letting you inside the garden. I’m sure that’s all he wants to see you about. Probably he just wants to warn you against getting up to mischief after you have moved in. You only have to answer nicely and promise to do as he says. You’ll be all right.’

To make sure, she sent a couple of old nannies along as well with strict instructions to watch over him:

‘See that his Pa doesn’t frighten him!’ she told them, and the old women promised their protection.

Obliged to go, yet still reluctant, Bao-yu contrived to do so at so dawdlilig a pace that each step can have advanced him only a few inches upon his way. Itso happened that Jia Zheng had gone for the purpose of discussing these matters into Lady Wang’s room and Lady Wang’s maids Golden, Sun-cloud, Sunset, Avis and Avocet were standing outside under the eaves. Their amusement when they caught sight of Bao-yu advancing at this snail’s pace into the courtyard was evident from the expression on their faces. Golden seized him by the hand, and thrusting out a pair of heavily carmined lips, she said to him in a whisper:

‘Look at that *byotiful* lipstick! I’ve only just put it on. Wouldn’t you like a taste of it?’

Suncloud, with a suppressed giggle, pushed her off him:

‘Can’t you see how scared he is? It’s mean of you to tease him at a time like this! He’s in a good mood,’ she said to Bao-yu. ‘You’d better go in straight away, while it lasts!’

Bao-yu entered in a sort of sideways crouch, the picture of a submissive son - a gesture that was wasted, however, since his father and mother were in the inner room at the back. Aunt Zhao raised the inner room’s portiere to admit him. He bowed to her and entered. Jia Zheng and Lady Wang sat facing each other on the kang talking. Ying-chun, Tan-chun, Xi-chun and Jia Huan were sitting on a row of chairs below. Ying-chun remained seated at his entrance, but the other three rose to their feet.

Jia Zheng glanced up and saw Bao-yu standing before him. The lively intelligence that shone in the boy’s every feature, his almost breath-taking beauty of countenance contrasted strikingly with Jia Huan’s cringing, hang-dog looks and loutish demeanour, and Jia Zheng thought suddenly of his other son, Jia Zhu, his Firstborn, whom he had lost. He glanced at Lady Wang. Of the children she had borne him Bao-yu was now the only surviving son. He knew how much the boy meant to her. He thought of himself, too: ageing now, his beard already grey. And as he thought, much of his customary dislike of Bao-yu slipped away, so that for the time being perhaps only ten or twenty per cent of it still remained. After what seemed to Bao-yu a very long time, he said:

‘Her Grace has expressed a fear that by spending your time in constant amusement outside you may become an idler and a dullard, and she has directed that you and the girls should be moved into the garden so that you may be kept more closely at your books. See to it that you work hard and diligently! If I detect any signs of your former unruliness and disobedience, you will be in for trouble!’

Bao-yu assented meekly. Lady Wang took his hand and drew him up beside her on the kang. Now that he was seated, Jia Huan and the other two sat down once more in their chairs. Lady Wang stroked Bao-yu’s neck affectionately:

‘Have you finished those pills I sent you the other day yet?’

‘There’s still one left)’ said Bao-yu.

‘You must come for some more tomorrow. I’ll give you another ten. You must get Aroma to give you one every night before you go to sleep.’

‘Yes. You ?old Aroma, Mother. She’s been giving me one every night, as you said.’

‘Who is this “Aroma”?’ asked Jia Zheng sharply.

‘A maid,’ said Lady Wang.

‘I suppose there are no limits to what a maid may be called,’ said Jia Zheng, ‘but who would have picked an

outlandish name like that to give her?'

Lady Wang could see that he was displeased and did her best to cover up for Bao-yu:

'I think it was Lady Jia who gave her the name.'

'Mother would never think of a name like that,' said Jia Zheng. 'It must have been Bao-yu.'

Bao-yu saw that a frank avowal was now unavoidable and rose to his feet:

'This maid has a surname which means "Flowers". There is a line in an old poem I happened to remember

The flowers' aroma breathes of hotter days

and so I named her after that,'

'When you get back you must change the name at once,' said Lady Wang hurriedly to Bao-yu. 'Come, Sir Zheng'—this to her husband - 'you aren't going to get angry about a little thing like that?'

'It doesn't really matter,' said Jia Zheng, 'and there is no need for him to change the name; but it demonstrates what I have always said about the boy: he is fundamentally in-capable of caring about serious matters and preoccupies himself with poetic frivolities and other such airy-fairy nonsense as a substitute for solid learning. Wretched fellow I' he shouted at Bao-yu. 'What are you waiting for?'

'Go now, go now I' said Lady Wang in a flutter. 'Grandma is probably waiting to begin her dinner.'

Bao-yu murmured a reply and retired, rather more slowly than was necessary. Emerging from the outer door, he grinned and stuck his tongue out at Golden, then shot off like a puff of smoke, the two old nannies hurrying after him. Arriving at the entrance of the covered passage-way he came upon Aroma leaning in the doorway. Her face lit up when she saw him returning unscathed and she asked him what his father had wanted to see him about.

'Oh, nothing much,' said Bao-yu. 'He just wanted to say a few words about not getting up to mischief after we've moved into the garden.'

Having answered Aroma, he went in to see his grandmother and told her about the interview. He found Dai-yu with her and asked her which part of the garden she planned to live in. It appeared that she had just been considering this question herself, for her answer was a prompt one:

'I've been thinking how nice it would be in the Naiad's House. I love all those bamboos and the little winding, half-hidden walk. It is so quiet and peaceful there.'

Bao-yu clapped his hands delightedly:

'Just what I would have chosen for you! I was *hoping* you would want to live there, because *I* want to live in the House of **Green** Delights—which means that we should be neighbours. And both places are quiet and tucked away.'

They were still discussing their plans when a servant arrived from Jia Zheng with a message for Grandmother Jia. it was to say that the twenty-second of the second month being a Lucky Day was the date on which Bao-yu and the girls were to move into the garden. Servants were to be allowed inside in the interim in order to make the rooms ready for them. It was finally settled that Bao-chai should have All-spice Court, Dai-yu the Naiad's House, Ying-chun the building on Amaryllis Eyot, Tan-chun the Autumn Studio, Xi-chun the Lotus Pavilion, Li Wan Sweet-rice Village, and Bao-yu the House of **Green** Delights. Each set of rooms was allotted two old women and four maids in addition to the occupant's existing maids and nannies, and there were other servants whose sole duty was sweeping and cleaning. On the twenty-second of the second month everyone moved in. The silent, deserted garden suddenly came to life—

Live flowers on silk-embroidered flowers up-glanced,

And unguent scents the scents of spring enhanced

as the bevy of gaily-dressed, chattering girls spread themselves through its quiet walks.

*

But to return to our hero.

Life for Bao-yu after his removal into the garden became utterly and completely satisfying. Every day was spent in the company of his maids and cousins in the most amiable and delightful occupations, such as

reading,
practising calligraphy,
strumming on the *qin*,
playing Go,
painting,
composing verses,
embroidering in coloured silks,
competitive flower-collecting,
making flower-sprays,
singing,
word games and
guess-fingers.

In a word, he was blissfully happy.

One product of this period was a set of four *Garden Nights* poems which, though they have little claim to poetic merit, give a fairly accurate impression of the mood and setting of those carefree days:

I.Spring

Behind silk hangings, in warm quilts cocooned,
His ears half doubt the frogs' first muted sound.
Rain at his window strikes, the pillow's cold;
Yet to the sleeper's eyes spring dreams unfold.
Why does the candle shed its waxen tear?
Why on each flower do angry drops appear?
By uncouth din of giggling maids distressed
He burrows deeper in his silken nest.

II. *Summer*

A tired maid sleeps at her embroidery.
A parrot in its gilt cage calls for tea.
Pale moonbeams on an opened mirror fall,
And burning sandal makes a fragrant pall.
From amber cups thirst-quenching nectar flows.
A willow-breeze through crystal curtains blows,
In pool-side kiosks light-clad maidens flit,
Or, dressed for bed, by open casements sit.

III. *Autumn*

In **Red** Rue Study, far from worldly din,
Through rosy gauze moonlight comes flooding in.

Outside, a stork sleeps on moss-wrinkled rocks,
And dew from well-side trees the crow's wings soaks.
A maid the great quilt's golden bird has spread;
Her languid master droops his raven head.
Wine-parched and sleepless, in the still night he cries
For tea, and soon thick smoke and steam arise.

IV. *Winter*

Midnight and winter: plum with bamboo sleeps,
While one midst Indian rugs his vigil keeps.
Only a stork outside is to be found –
No orioles now, though white flowers mask the ground.
Chill strikes the maid's bones through her garments fine;
Her fur-clad master's somewhat worse for wine;
But, in tea-making mysteries deep-skilled,
She has with new-swept snow the kettle filled.

The indifferent quality of these poems did not prevent members of that class of worldlings who see merit in a name and excellence in a title from copying them out and proclaiming them everywhere as miracles of precocious talent when they discovered that their author was the thirteen-year-old heir apparent of Sir Jia of Rong-guo House. There were also a number of bright young things who professed an extravagant liking for the *deliciousness* of the poems, and who copied them on to fans and wall-spaces and recited them on the least provocation (or none at all) at social gatherings. Soon Bao-yu was being besieged with requests for more poems, for specimens of his calligraphy, for paintings, for inscriptions. He began to feel himself a lion and was kept constantly busy with these dilettantish 'duties'.

Then, quite suddenly, in the midst of this placid, agreeable existence, he was discontented. He got up one day feeling out of sorts. Nothing he did brought any relief. Whether he stayed indoors or went out into the garden, he remained bored and miserable. The garden's female population were mostly still in that age of innocence when freedom from inhibition is the fruit of ignorance. Waking and sleeping they surrounded him, and their mindless giggling was constantly in his ears. How could *they* understand the restless feelings that now consumed him? In his present mood of discontent he was bored with the garden and its inmates; yet his attempts to find distraction outside it ended in the same emptiness and ennui.

Tealeaf saw how it was with him and racked his brains for a remedy. Unfortunately all the things he could think of seemed to be things that Bao-yu had already tried and grown tired of. But no, there *was* something he had not yet tried. As soon as Tealeaf thought of it, he set off to the book-stalls and bought a pile of books—books of a kind Bao-yu had never heard about - to give as a present to his young master. His purchases included

Old Inklubber's Stories Old and New
The Secret History of Flying Swallow
Sister of Flying; Swallow
The Infamous Loves of Empress Wu
The Jade Ring Concubine, or Peeps in the Inner Palace

and a heap of playbooks—mostly romantic comedies and the like.

Bao-yu took one look at this gift and was enraptured; but Tealeaf uttered a warning:

'Don't take these into the garden! If you do, and anyone finds out about them, I'll be in *real trouble*—more than just a bellyful!'

The injunction was one with which Bao-yu was most unwilling to comply. After a good deal of hesitation he picked out a few of the chaster volumes to keep by his bed and read when no one was about, and left the cruder, more forthright ones behind, hidden somewhere in his outer study.

One day after lunch—it was round about the Midwash of the third month, as our forefathers, who measured the passage of time by their infrequent ablutions, were wont to say -Bao-yu set off for Drenched Blossoms Weir with the volumes of *Western Chamber* under his arm, and sitting down on a rock underneath the peach-tree which grew there beside the bridge, he took up the first volume and began, very attentively, to read the play. He had just reached the line

The **red** flowers in their hosts are falling when a little gust of wind blew over and a shower of petals suddenly rained down from the tree above, covering his clothes, his book and all the ground about him. He did not like to shake them off for fear they got trodden underfoot, so collecting as many of them as he could in the lap of his gown, he carried them to the water's edge and shook them in. The petals bobbed and circled for a while on the surface of the water before finally disappearing over the weir. When he got back he found that a lot more of them had fallen while he was away. As he hesitated, a voice behind him said,

'What are you doing here?'

He looked round and saw that it was Dai-yu. She was carrying a garden hoe with a muslin bag hanging from the end of it on her shoulder and a garden broom in her hand.

'You've come just at the right moment,' said Bao-yu, smiling at her. 'Here, sweep these petals up and tip them in the water for me! I've just tipped one lot in myself.'

'It isn't a good idea to tip them in the water,' said Dai-yu. 'The water you see here is clean, but farther on beyond the weir, where it flows past people's houses, there are all sorts of muck and impurity, and in the end they get spoiled just the same. In that corner over there I've got a grave for the flowers, and what I'm doing now is sweeping them up and putting them in this silk bag to bury them there, so that they can gradually turn back into earth. Isn't that a cleaner way of disposing of them?'

Bao-yu was full of admiration for this idea.

'Just let me put this book somewhere and I'll give you a hand.'

'What book?' said Dai-yu.

'Oh... The *Doctrine of the Mean* and *The Greater Learning,'* he said, hastily concealing it.

'Don't try to fool *me!'* said Dai-yu. 'You would have done much better to let me look at it in the first place, instead of hiding it so guiltily.'

'In your case, coz, I have nothing to be afraid of;' said Bao-yu; 'but if I do let you look, you must promise not to tell anyone. It's marvellous stuff. Once you start reading it, you'll even stop wanting to eat!'

He handed the book to her, and Dai-yu put down her things and looked. The more she read, the more she liked it, and before very long she had read several acts. She felt the power of the words and their lingering fragrance.

Long after she had finished reading, when she had laid down the book and was sitting there rapt and silent, the lines continued to ring on in her head.

'Well,' said Bao-yu, 'is it good?'

Dai-yu smiled and nodded.

Bao-yu laughed:

'How can I, full of sickness and of woe,
Withstand that face which kingdoms could o'erthrow?'

Dai-yu reddened to the tips of her ears. The eyebrows that seemed to frown yet somehow didn't were raised now in anger and the lovely eyes flashed. There was rage in her **crimson** cheeks and resentment in all her looks.

'You're *hateful!'* - she pointed a finger at him in angry accusal — 'deliberately using that horrid play to take

advantage of me. I'm going. straight off to tell Uncle and Aunt!'

At the words 'take advantage of me' her eyes filled with tears, and as she finished speaking she turned from him and began to go. Bao-yu rushed after her and held her back:

'Please, *please* forgive me! Dearest coz! If I had the slightest intention of taking advantage of you, may I fall into the water and be eaten up by an old bald-headed turtle! When you have become a great lady and gone at last to your final resting-place, I shall become the stone turtle that stands in front of your grave and spend the rest of eternity carrying your tombstone on my back as a punishment!'

His ridiculous declamation provoked a sudden explosion of mirth. She laughed and simultaneously wiped the tears away with her knuckles:

'Look at you - the same as ever! Scared as anything, but you still have to go on talking nonsense. Well, I know you now for what you are:

"Of silver spear the leaden counterfeit"!'

'Well! *You* can talk!' said Bao-yu laughing. 'Listen to *you!* Now *I'm* going off to tell on *you*!'

'You needn't imagine you're the only one with *a* good memory,' said Dai-yu haughtily. 'I suppose I'm allowed to remember lines too if I like.'

Bao-yu took back the book from her with a good-natured laugh:

'Never mind about all that now! Let's get on with this flower-burying!'

And the two of them set about sweeping together the fallen flower-petals and putting them into the bag. They had just finished burying it when Aroma came hurrying up to them:

'So there you are! I've been looking for you everywhere. Your Uncle She isn't well and the young ladies have all gone over to visit him. Her Old Ladyship says you are to go as well. You'd better come back straight away and get changed!,

Bao-yu picked up his book, took leave of Dai-yu, and accompanied Aroma back to his room.

And there, for the moment, we shill leave him.

*

With Bao-yu gone and the girls evidently all out, Dai-yu began to feel lonely and depressed. She was on her way back to her own room and was just passing by the corner of Pear Tree Court when she heard the languorous meanderings of a flute and the sweet modulation of a girlish voice coming from the other side of the wall, and knew that the twelve little actresses were at their rehearsal inside. Although she was paying no particular attention to the singing, a snatch of it chanced suddenly to fall with very great clarity on her ear, so that she was able to make out quite distinctly the words of two whole lines of the aria being sung:

'Here multiflorate splendour blooms forlorn
Midst broken fountains, mouldering walls –'

They moved her strangely, and she stopped to listen. The voice went on:

'And the bright air, the brilliant morn
Feed my despair.
Joy and gladness have withdrawn
To other gardens, other halls -'

At this point the listener unconsciously nodded her head and sighed.

'It's true,' she thought, 'there is good poetry even in plays. What a pity most people think of them only as entertainment. A lot of the real beauty in them must go unappreciated.'

She suddenly became aware that her mind was wandering and regretted that her inattention had caused her to miss some of the singing. She listened again. This time it was another voice:

'Because for you, my flowerlike fair,
The swift years like the waters flow—'

The words moved her to the depth of her being.

'I have sought you everywhere,
And at last I find you here, In a dark room full of woe—'

It was like intoxication, a sort of delirium. Her legs would no longer support her. She collapsed on to a near-by rockery and crouched there, the words turning over and over in her mind:

Because for you, my flowerlike fair,
The swift years like the waters flow …

Suddenly she thought of a line from an old poem she had read quite recently:

Relentlessly the waters flow, the flowers fade.

From that her mind turned to those famous lines written in his captivity by the tragic poet-emperor of Later Tang:

The blossoms fall, the water flows,
The glory of the spring is gone

In nature's world as in the human one—

and to some lines from *The Western Chamber* which she had lust been reading:

As flowers fall and the flowing stream runs **red,**
A thousand sickly fancies crowd the mind.

All these different lines and verses combined into a single overpowering impression) riving her soul with a pang of such keen anguish that the tears started from her eyes. She might have remained there indefinitely, weeping and comfortless, had not someone just at that moment come up behind her and tapped her on the shoulder. She turned to look and saw that it was—

But if you wish to know who it was, you must read the next chapter!

CHAPTER 24

The Drunken Diamond shows nobility of character
in handling his money

And the Quiet-voiced Girl provides material for
fantasy by losing her handkerchief

As Dai-yu continued to crouch there, a prisoner of her own sorrowful thoughts and emotions, someone suddenly came up behind her and tapped her on the shoulder:
'What are you doing here all on your own?'
She looked round with a start. It was Caltrop.
'You silly girl!' said Dai-yu. 'You gave me quite a shock, creeping up on me like that. Where have you just come from?'
Caltrop laughed mischievously:
'I've been looking for our young lady, but I can't find her anywhere. Your Nightingale is looking for you too, by the way. She says Mrs Lian has sent you - I think it's some kind of tea. Shall I go with you?'
She took her by the hand and accompanied her back to the Naiad's House. The present from Xi-feng she had mentioned was waiting there when they arrived: two little cylindrical containers of a new tea supplied to the Palace for the Emperor's own use. The two girls sat down and discussed the relative merits of various pieces of embroidery, played a little Go, and looked at one or two books. Then Cal trop went off again.
Our narrative leaves them at this point and passes to other matters.

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Recalled to his own apartment by Aroma, Bao$_1$u arrived back to find his grandmother's maid Faithful reclining on the couch examining Aroma's needlework.
'Where have you been?' she said, as soon as she saw him enter. 'Her Old Ladyship is waiting for you. She wants you to go next door to see how your Uncle She is getting on You'd better hurry up and get changed!'
Aroma went into the next room to get his clothes. Bao-yu sat on the edge of the couch and kicked his shoes off. While he was waiting for his boots to come, he turned and scrutinized Faithful. She was wearing a pale strawberry coloured dress of silk damask, a sleeveless black satin jacket, stockings of eggshell **blue**, and dark-red embroidered slippers. Her neck, which was towards him as she bent down once more to inspect the needlework, was encircled at its base by a reddish-**purple** silk scarf. A fascinating neck. He bent down over it to sniff its perfume and stroked it softly with his hand. It was as smooth and white as Aroma's. With an impish chuckle he threw himself upon her and clung like sticky toffee about her person:
'Come on, Faithful darling, give us a taste of your lipstick!'
Faithful called out to Aroma in the next room:
'Aroma, come in and look at this! All the years you've been with him now—haven't you managed to cure him yet?'
Aroma came in with her arms full of clothes.
'I don't know what's the matter with you,' she said to Bao-yu. 'Heaven knows, I've *tried* hard enough to cure you! If you go on much longer like this, you're just going to make it impossible to go on living here any longer.'
She hurried him on with his dressing. When he was ready, he accompanied Faithful to the front apartment to see Grand-mother Jia. Going outside again, he found horse and servants ready waiting and was about to get into the saddle, when he noticed Jia Lian dismounting opposite, having just returned from *his* visit. The two cousins went up to each other and exchanged a few words. Just at that moment a figure emerged from the side of the courtyard and greeted Bao-yu:
'Uncle Bao! How are you?'

Bao-yu turned. It was a tall, thin youth of eighteen or nine-teen who had spoken, with a thin, handsome face and an air of great natural refinement. Although his face was familiar, Bao-yu could not for the moment remember his name or which part of the clan he belonged to.

'You look very puzzled!' said Jia Lian amusedly. 'Surely you know who this is? This is Jia Yun - Cousin Bu-shi's boy, who lives in West Lane.'

'Yes, of course,' said Bao-yu. 'I can't think what made me forget!—How's your mother?' he asked Jia Yun. 'What business brings you here today?'

Jia Yun pointed to Jia Lian:

'I came here to have a word with Uncle Lian.'

'You've grown very good-looking since I saw you last,' said Bao-yu with a grin. 'You could almost be my son.'

'You've got a nerve 'said Jia Lian laughing. 'Your *son?* He's five or six years older than you.'

'How old *are* you then?' Bao-yu asked him.

'Eighteen.'

Being a sharp-witted young man who knew how to make the most of an opportunity, Jia Yun was quick to turn Bao-yu's jest to good account.

'There's a saying about "grandsires in cradles and babbies with beards", you know; and even if I *am* older than you, "the highest mountain can't shut out the sun"! I've had no one to care for me during these last few years since my father died, and if you don't mind having so stupid a person for your son, I should certainty be very happy to have you for a father.'

'You hear that?' said Jia Lian. 'Now you've got yourself a son! You'll find that parenthood is no laughing matter, I can tell you!

He left them and went inside, chuckling to himself.

Bao-yu smiled at his new 'son':

'Next time you're free, come and see me. Don't waste your time trying to join in *their* little intrigues! I'm afraid I'm not free at the moment, but if you will come round to my study tomorrow, we can spend all day together, and I shall be able to show you round the garden.'

With these words he mounted his horse and set off, his pages at his back, for Jia She's.

Bao-yu found that his uncle was suffering from nothing more serious than a chill. He delivered his grandmother's message first and then asked after his uncle on his own behalf. Jia She stood up to hear what his mother had to say, and when Bao-yu had finished, ordered a servant to take him to his Aunt Xing's room. Bao-yu withdrew and followed the servant through the back and across the courtyard to the main reception room. Seeing him enter, Lady Xing rose to her feet to ask after Grandmother Jia, then sat down again to be asked after in turn by Bao-yu. Then she drew him up to sit beside her on the kang and asked him about the others, at the same time giving orders for tea to be served.

While they were still sipping the tea, little Jia Cong, the son of one of Jia She's concubines, came in to say 'hullo' to his Cousin Bao.

'Where did this little ragamuffin come from?' Lady Xing scolded. 'I don't know what that Nannie of yours can be thinking of to let you get in such a state! I declare, your face is as black as a crow! No one would ever think to look at you that you were an educated little boy and came from a good family!'

While she scolded, Jia Huan and Jia Lan arrived, their duty call on Jia She evidently just completed. Lady Xing made them sit on chairs below the kang. Seeing Bao-yu up on the kang with Lady Xing and sharing her cushion, and observing how she fondled and petted him, Jia Huan soon began to feel uncomfortable and made a sign to Jia Lan indcating that they should go. As Jia Huan was his uncle, Jia Lan had to do as he said, so the little boy and the big one rose together to take their leave. Bao-yu said he would go with them, but Lady Xing stopped him with a gracious smile:

'You sit where you are! I've got something else to say to you.'

He was obliged to stay. Lady Xing turned to the other two:
'When you get back, do each of you give my regards to your mothers. I won't ask you to stay to dinner because I've already got the girls here and they are making so much rumpus that it's given me a headache.'
Jia Huan and Jia Lan promised to convey her greetings and went out.
'Where *are* the girls, then?' Bao-yu asked after they had gone. *'I* haven't seen them.'
'Oh, I don't know,' said Lady Xing nonchalantly. 'They only sat here for a few moments, then they went round to the back. They're round the back somewhere or other.'
'You said there was something you wanted to talk to me about, Aunt. What was it you wanted to tell me?'
'Oh' nothing at all!' said Lady Xing gaily. 'I only said that because I wanted you to stay and have dinner here with me and the girls. And I've got something nice for you to take back with you afterwards.'
Bao-yu and his aunt chatted away, and before long it was time for dinner and the three girls were called in. A table and chairs were arranged, the table was laid, and Lady Xing, her daughter Ying-chun, her two nieces and her nephew sat down to their meal. When it was over, Bao-yu went in to take his leave of Jia She, after which he and the girls returned to their own side of the mansion. There they first went in to see Grandmother Jia and Lady Wang and then returned to their own apartments for the night.
So much for Bao-yu and the girls.
Let us return to Jia Yun who, after his encounter with Bao-yu, had gone in to see Jia Lian and ask him if there was any prospect of a job.
'A job turned up only the other day,' said Jia Lian, 'but unfortunately your Aunt Feng was very anxious that I should give it to Jia Qin and I'm afraid I let him have it. However, she did mention that there will soon be a lot of planting to do in the garden, and she promised that as soon as that work turns up we shall definitely hand it over to you.'
Jia Yun was silent for some moments, then he said:
'All right. I'll just have to go on waiting, then. But would you mind not mentioning this visit to Auntie? I can tell her about it myself, if need be, next time I see her.'
'I shan't mention it,' said Jia Lian. 'I've got better things to do with my time than go running after her to talk about things like this! Tomorrow I have to go to Xing-yi, by the way. I have to get back on the same day—but perhaps you'd better wait until the day after tomorrow before coming round again. In fact, you'd better wait until the *evening* of the day after tomorrow - some time after the beginning of the first watch. Any time before that I shall be busy.'
He terminated the interview by going into the inner room to change his clothes.
Jia Yun went out of the Rong-guo mansion and set off for home, ruminating as he went. A plan at last formed in his mind. Instead of returning home, he struck off for the house of his maternal uncle.

His uncle's name was Bu Shi-ren. He was the proprietor of a perfumery, and when *Jia* Yun arrived had only just got back from the shop. Seeing his nephew enter, he asked him what he had come about.

'I'm on to something which needs your help,' said Jia Yun. 'Please Uncle, could you possibly let me have four ounces of Barns camphor and four ounces of musk on credit? I promise faithfully that you shall have the money by Autumn Quarter-day.'
Bu Shi-ren 'humph-ed' scornfully:
'Don't talk to me about credit! A while ago we let one of the assistants have several taels' worth of goods on credit for one of his relations, and we haven't seen the money for it yet. We had to share the loss between us. We've got a written agreement now that in future if any of us gives credit to a friend or relation, he is liable to a fine of twenty taels of silver to be shared out among the rest.
'In any case, we're short of stock on those two items. I doubt we've got that much in the shop, even if you could pay cash down for it. We'd have to try to raise it for you elsewhere.
'And for another thing: what do you want it for, anyway? I don't expect it's for any serious purpose. Even if I let

you have it on credit, I expect it would only get thrown away on some foolishness or other.

'And don't you go saying that your Uncle's always on at you when you come to see him! You young people just don't know what's good for you. If only you could pull yourself together and earn a bit of money, no one would be happier for you than I should.'

Jia Yun smiled:

'What you say is no doubt perfectly true, Uncle. But when Father died I was too little to understand what was going on, and according to what Mother has since told me, it was you who stepped in and took care of everything. Now you know as well as I do that it wasn't *I* who spent all the money that came from selling off our little bit of property, and I don't see what I am supposed to do without any capital. Even the cleverest housewife can't make bread without fl9ur! You're lucky you've only got *me* to contend with. Anyone else in my position would be pestering the life out of you. They'd be round here scrounging all the time: a pound of rice one day, a quart of beans the next. Then you *would* have something to grumble about.!'

'My dear boy,' said Bu Shi-ren, 'if I had it to give, you should have it and welcome! Your trouble is, though, as I'm always telling your Aunt, you won't t*hink ahead.* If only you'd pull yourself together and go and have a word with your Father's folk at the big house—or if you can't get to see them, put your pride in your pocket and make yourself agreeable to some of the stewards there—get yourself a job of some kind! When I was on my way out of the city the other day, I ran into that cousin Of yours from North Street riding on a donkey with four or five carriages behind him and fifty or sixty nuns on his way to your family temple out in the country. Now that's a shrewd young fellow! You can't tell me he got that job by doing nothing!'

Exasperated by his uncle's nagging, Jia Yun got up to go. 'What's the hurry?' said Bu Shi-ren. 'You can have some-thing to eat before you go -'Are you crazy?' his wife's voice cut in from the kitchen. 'I *told* you we haven't got any rice in the house. I've just bought this half a pound of noodles that I'm cooking for you now. I don't know what you're acting so lordly about, asking people to dinner. The boy'll only go hungry if he stays!'

'Buy another half a pound, woman, and put it in with the rest!' said Bu Shi-ren.

'Goldie!' Mrs Bu shouted to her daughter. 'Go over to Mrs Wang's house across the road and ask if she can lend us a few cash. Tell her we can pay her back tomorrow!'

But before she had finished, Jia Yun, with a muttered 'Don't bother!' had slipped quietly away.

Angrily leaving his uncle's house behind him, he was on his way back home, eyes fixed on the ground as he brooded miserably on his affairs, when he walked head-on into drunkard. The man seized hold of him with a curse:

'You sodding blind, bumping into me like that?'

The voice was a familiar one. Looking closet he saw that it was his neighbour Ni Er, a racketeer who made most of his money from high-interest loans supplemented by what he took off other players in the gambling dens. He drank too much and was always getting into fights. At this particular moment he was on his way back from paying a little 'call' on one of his debtors— evidently a lucrative one, for he was already half-seas-over. He did not take kindly to being bumped into, and it would have gone badly with Jia Yun if he had not immediately identified himself:

'Ni, old chap, don't strike! It's me! I wasn't looking where I was going.'

Hearing the voice, Ni Er opened his bleary eyes a little wider, saw that it was Jia Yun, released him - lurching heavily as he did so—and gave a crapulous laugh:

'Oh,' he said, 'young Mist' Jia. Parm me. Whetra you jus' come from?'

'Don't ask me!' said Jia Yun bitterly. 'I've just been given the bird!'

'Nemmind!' said Ni Er. 'Anyone been bothering you, Mist' Jia, jus' tell me and I'll settle accounts with him for you! You know me. Ni Er. The Drunken Diamond. Old Dime'll look after you. Anyone this part of the town troubling neighbour of Dime's, don't care who he is, guarantee put him out of business.'

‘Look, Diamond, if you’ll promise not to get angry, I’ll tell you what happened,’ said Jia Yun, and proceeded to give him an account of his interview with Bu Shi- ten. Ni Er was hugely incensed:

‘Damn fella! Give the damn fella piece of my mind if he wasn’t a relation of yours. Make my blood boil. Damn fella! Nemmind. Dome be downhearted. Got a few taels of silver here. If you can use it, help yourself! Good neighbour of Dime’s. Here y’are. Interest-free loan.’

‘This man’s a racketeer,’ Jia Yun thought to himself, ‘but he’s been known to do a good turn before now—in fact, he’s got quite a reputation in some quarters as a champion of the poor. If I don’t accept his offer, he may turn nasty and I shall be in trouble. Better accept the money and pay back double the amount when I can.,

Having made the decision, he thanked Ni Er with a smile:

‘You’re a real sport, Diamond! Since you’ve been kind enough to make the offer then, I won’t refuse. I’ll make you out a proper IOU for it when I get home.’

Ni Er roared with laughter:

‘There’s only fifteen taels and six pennyweights of silver here. If you’re going to go writing lOUs, I won’t lend it to you!’

Jia Yun laughed too an4 took the money from him:

‘All right, Diamond, anything you say! Let’s not fall out about it!’

‘That’s more like it!’ said Ni Er. ‘Getting dark now. Won’t keep you for a drink. Still got a little business to do. You go on home. Like you to give a message to my old woman, be so kind. Not going home tonight. If there’s anything to tell me about, she can send my daughter round first thing tomorrow. Find me at Bandy Wang, the horse-dealer’s.’

With these words he went on his way, lurching horribly.

The encounter left Jia Yun somewhat bemused.

‘That Ni Er’s certainly a character!’ he thought. ‘The trouble is, it may only have been the drink that made him generous. Perhaps when he’s sobered up tomorrow he’ll want his money back with a hundred per cent interest. What am I going to do then?’

Then he suddenly remembered what the money would enable him to do:

‘Of course! It doesn’t matter! If I get the job, I can pay back the loan *and* a hundred per cent interest easily.’

With that thought uppermost in his mind he went into a money-changer’s to have the silver weighed. To his great delight it turned out to be exactly the amount Ni Er had said, not a pennyweight less. Then he went home, calling at Ni Er’s house on the way to give the message to his wife. Entering his own house he found his mother on the kang spinning. She looked up as he entered:

‘Where have you been all day?’

He did not like to mention that he had been to see her brother in case she was angry. He only said:

‘Been at Rong-guo House waiting for Uncle Lian. Have you had supper yet?’

‘Yes, I’ve had mine. I put something aside for you.’

She called to their little slavey to fetch it for him. Except for her work-lamp it was already dark indoors, so after finishing his supper he got himself rea4y for the night, unrolled his bedding, and settled down to sleep.

Rising early next morning, he went off as soon as he had washed to the shops in Central Street outside the south gate of the Inner City and bought camphor and musk at a perfumer’s. From there he went to Rong-guo House, and having first ascertained at the gate that Jia Lian was out for the day, he made his way to the Lians’ apartment at the back. Outside the gateway leading to their courtyard a number of page boys were sweeping the ground with long-handled brooms. Suddenly Zhou Rui’s wife came out and addressed them:

‘Stop sweeping now! The Mistress is coming.’

Jia Yun hurried up to her with a smile of greeting:

‘Where is Aunt Lian off to, then?’

‘Her Old Ladyship wants her,’ said Zhou Rui’s wife. ‘I think it’s to see about some tailoring.’

As she spoke, the subject of his inquiry emerged from the gateway, surrounded by a bevy of attendants. Jia Yun was well aware that she had a weakness for flattery and the showier forms of deference. Bringing his hands together in an exaggerated salute and stepping briskly forward, he made her a tremendous bow and wished her in good health.

Xi-feng continued to walk on and, without actually looking at him or turning her head, inquired after his mother’s health and asked why she never came to visit.

‘She’s not been very well, Auntie. She’s always thinking about you and meaning to pay a call, but when it’s come to it, she just hasn’t been able to get out.’

‘You’re a wonderful liar!’ said Xi-feng with a laugh. ‘I don’t suppose she’s ever thought about me until this moment!’

‘I’m too much afraid of lightning to lie to my superiors,’ said Jia Yun. ‘Mother *was* talking about you only last night, as a matter of fact. She said, “Your Auntie Lian is only a single weak woman, yet she has all those responsibilities. It’s a good thing she has the will-power to keep everything running so smoothly, because if that should go, she’d be worn out in no tine.”‘

Xi-feng was now all smiles, and halted in spite of herself to hear more.

‘And why should you and your mother be chewing over *my* affairs behind my back, pray?’

‘That’s a long story,’ said Jia Yun. ‘A very good friend of mine who runs a perfumery and had quite a bit put by in savings decided to invest his money in a government post and bought himself the place of an Assistant Sub-Prefect. Well, a few days ago his posting came and it turns out to be for somewhere down in Yunnan. He’s taking his family with him, so of course he won’t be able to keep on the shop, and he’s been going over all his stock deciding what to give away and what to put in his clearance sale. He decided to give the more valuable stuff to friends and relations. My share was a whole quarter of a pound of Borneo camphor and another quarter of musk, and I was discussing with Mother last night what we ought to do with it. We don’t know anyone who could afford to buy it; and it seems a shame to sell it at less than the price; and even if we *gave* it away, we couldn’t think of anyone who would want so much. But then I suddenly thought of you and the packets of money you’ve spent on this kind of thing in years past, and I thought to myself that this year, what with Her Grace in the Palace and the Double Fifth already not far off, you’re sure to be using ten or twelve times the usual amount. So, to cut a long story short, we decided to make a present of it to you. There you are, Auntie -a little token of my esteem!’

As he spoke, he took out a small brocade-covered box and respectfully raised it in both hands to offer her.

Now Xi-feng *was* just beginning to think about the problem of purchasing aromatics for the Double Fifth festival, and it pleased her very much to be relieved of the trouble of doing so— especially when it was in so agreeable a manner. She smiled at him graciously before turning to her maid:

‘Felicity, take my nephew’s present and give it to Patience to take care of!’

The smile was directed once more on Jia Yun:

‘You are very thoughtful. I’m not surprised your Uncle speaks so highly of you. He’s often told me what a well-spoken, sensible young man you are.’

They seemed to be sailing into harbour. Jia Yun took a step closer:

‘Has Uncle been talking to you about me then?’—The tone in which he asked the question was deliberately meaningful.

Xi-feng was on the point of telling him that he would get the tree-planting job when she reflected that by doing so she would be cheapening herself in his estimation. He would almost certainly suppose that she was promising it in return for the perfume. In replying to his question she therefore confined herself to a few insipid civilities, avoiding all mention of jobs and trees, and presently continued on her way to Grandmother Jia’s.

Obviously Jia Yun was in no position to raise the subject if his aunt was not willing, so lie was obliged to return in the same uncertainty in which he had come. Back home he remembered Bao-yu's invitation of the previous day, and as soon as he had finished his meal, he returned once more to Rong-guo House and made his way to Sunset Studio outside the gateway leading to Lady Jia's quarters. He found the pages Tealeaf and Ploughboy sitting over a game of chess and arguing about a piece that one of them had just taken. Other pages—Trickles, Sweeper, Cloudy and Storky—were up on the roof looking for fledgelings. Jia Yun entered the courtyard and stamped his foot:

'Come on, you young rapscallions I Can't you see you've got a visitor?'

The pages, except Tealeaf, melted away. Jia Yun went into the study and sat down in a chair.

'Has Master Bao been here yet?'

'He hasn't been here yet today,' said Tealeaf. 'If you want to talk to him, I'll have a look and see if he's about.'

With that he, too, vanished.

For about the time it would take to eat a meal, Jia Yun gazed at the paintings, calligraphic scrolls and antiques which adorned the room. At the end of that time, as there was still no sign of Tealeaf, he took a look outside to see if there were any other pages whom he could ask to take a message; but they had all gone off to play elsewhere. Dejectedly he went back once more to wait.

'Tealeaf!'

A soft and thrilling voice was calling from outside. Craning Out to look he saw a fifteen- or sixteen-year-old maid standing near the entrance to the study. She was a neat, pleasant-looking girl with a pair of limpid, intelligent eyes. Seeing a strange man in the room, she quickly shrank back out of his line of vision. At that very moment Tealeaf walked back into the courtyard.

'Ah, good!' he said, catching sight of the maid. 'I was beginning to wonder how I'd ever get a message to him.'

Jia Yun ran out to question him:

'Well?'

'Waited for ages,' said Tealeaf, 'but no one came by. *She's* from his room, though' - he indicated the soft-voiced maid –'Listen, dear,' he said addressing her. 'Can you take a message for us? Tell him that Mr Jia from West Lane is here.'

On learning that the visitor was a member of the clan, the maid became less concerned about concealment and engaged the limpid eyes in bolder scrutiny of his features. The object of her scrutiny now addressed her:

'Don't bother about the "West Lane" stuff! Just say that "Yun" has called!'

The girl reflected for some moments, then, with a half-smile, she said:

'If I were you, Mr Jia, I'd go home now and come again tomorrow. I'll try to get a message through to him this evening if I get the chance.'

'What's the idea?' said Tealeaf.

'He didn't have his nap today,' said the maid. 'That means he'll be having dinner early. Then suppose he doesn't go out after dinner: are you going to let Mr Jia wait here all day without eating? It would be much better if he went home now and came again tomorrow. Even if I succeed in getting word through to him as soon as I get back, he'll probably only send an answer to the message. I don't expect he'll actually come over.'

Her words were sensible and to the point and were spoken in the same thrilling tone that had first attracted him. Jia Yun would have liked to ask her name, but etiquette forbade that he should do so now that he knew she was one of Bao-yu's maids. He just said:

'I'm sure you're right. I'll come again tomorrow, then.'

He turned to go.

'I'll get some tea for you, Mr Jia,' said Tealeaf. 'Have a cup of tea before you go.'

'No thanks,' said Jia Yun, looking back over his shoulder but continuing to go. 'I've got other business.'

The words were for Tealeaf, but the look which accompanied them was directed at the soft-voiced maid, who was still standing there.

Jia Yun went back home and returned next day as she had advised. On his way in he ran into Xi-feng outside the main gate. She was about to visit Jia Lian's parents next door and had just got into her carriage. Seeing Jia Yun, she made her attendants call to him to stop.

'Yun!' She smiled at him through the window of the carriage. 'You've got a nerve, my lad, playing a trick like that on me! I see now why you gave me that present. It's a job you were after. Your Uncle told me yesterday. Apparently you've been on to him about it already.'

Jia Yun smiled back ruefully:

'I'd rather we didn't go into my dealings with Uncle, if you don't mind! I'm beginning to wish I'd never spoken to him about it. If I'd realized earlier what the situation was, I should have gone straight to you in the first place. I'm sure if I had, it would all have been settled long ago. I'm afraid Uncle has let me down.'

'Humph!' said Xi-feng. 'So that's why you came to me yesterday, is it? You'd had no success with the husband so you thought you'd try your luck with the wife!'

'That's most unfair, Auntie!' Jia Yun protested. 'It was a purely disinterested present. I wasn't thinking at all about a job when I gave it to you. If I had been, why do you suppose I didn't take the opportunity of asking you about it at the time? However, since you do now know that I'm looking for one, I'd like to forget about Uncle and throw myself on your kindness instead.'

'You have a very devious way of going about things,' said Xi-feng with a hint of malice in her smile. 'Why couldn't you have spoken up sooner? A little thing like this is hardly worth so much delay. We still need some more trees and shrubs planted in the garden, and I've been trying to think of someone to do the job. If you'd spoken up earlier, it could all have been done by now.'

'You can set me to work tomorrow, Auntie. I'll be ready.'

Xi-feng thought for a while.

'I don't know that it's a very suitable job for you. Perhaps we'd better wait until next New Year and put you in charge of lanterns and fireworks. That's a much bigger job.'

'Look, Auntie: you give me this planting job now, then; if you're satisfied with the way I do it, you can give me the other job later on.'

Xi-feng laughed:

'You certainly know how to fish with a long line!—All right, then! It's not really my affair, but I suppose as your Uncle has mentioned it to me—I'm only going next door now and I shall be back again after lunch. Come round a little after midday to get the money and you shall start your planting the day after tomorrow.'

She told the servants to harness the carriage and drove off to make her call.

Beside himself with joy, Jia Yun now continued on his way to Sunset Studio to look for Bao-yu. In point of fact Bao-yu had gone off first thing that morning to call on the Prince of Bei-jing; but no one seemed to know about this, and Jia Yun sat waiting expectantly throughout the whole of the morning. Having waited until noon, he inquired whether Xi-feng was back yet, and being informed that she was, he wrote out a form of receipt, took it round to the Lians' apartment, and sent in word that he had called for his tally. Sunshine came out in response to his message and asked him for the receipt, which he took indoors. Presently he reappeared and handed it back to Jia Yun with the date and amount filled in in the blanks he had left for this purpose, together with the precious tally which would enable him to draw the money. Glancing at the receipt as he took it from him, Jia Yun was delighted to observe that the figures entered were for a payment of two hundred taels of silver. He hurried off to the counting-house to

collect it, then home once more to share the joyful news with his mother.

Next day he was off long before daylight to look up Ni Er and pay him back the loan. That done, he took another fifty taels of the silver with him and called on a nurseryman outside the West Gate called Fang Chun, from whom he bought a large number of trees.

At this point our narrative abandons Jia Yun's affairs and returns to Bao-yu.

> When Bao-yu, in the course of his meeting with Jia Yun, had invited Jia Yun to drop in and spend the following day with him, the invitation was of the careless, half-serious kind that is unfortunately typical of young gentlemen of his class. As he had made no real effort to remember it at the time, it naturally slipped his memory the following day. Returning now, two evenings later, from the palace of the Prince of Bei-jing where he had been all day, he called first on his grandmother and his mother and then returned to his own rooms in the garden and changed back into his everyday clothes.

He decided to take a bath; and since Aroma was out, having been 'borrowed' by Bao-chai to make braid buttons on a dress, Ripple and Emerald had gone off to see about the water. Of the other senior maids, Skybright had been fetched home for her cousin's birthday and Musk was away ill; and the few heavy-work maids left in attendance had all assumed that their services would not be required and had gone off in search of their gossips. For a quarter of an hour Bao-yu was left entirely on his own. It chanced that precisely at this moment he wanted someone to get him some tea. He had already called a couple of times without response and at his third call two or three old charwomen came hurrying in to see what was the matter.

'No, no: I don't need you!' - he waved them away impatiently. The old women retired, baffled.

Since there were no maids, Bao-yu saw that he would have to serve himself. He found himself a cup and was about to take up the pot to pour himself some tea when a voice started speaking right behind him:

'Let me, Master Bao! You might scald yourself.'

Bao-yu jumped. The owner of the voice hurriedly relieved him of the cup.

'Where have you been all this time?' he said. 'You gave me quite a start, coming up suddenly like that!'

She handed him his tea with a smile:

'I was in the back courtyard. I came in through the court-yard door at the back. Didn't you hear me coming?'

Bao-yu sipped his tea and observed her carefully. Her dress, though not shabby, was far from new. By contrast she had a magnificent head of raven-black hair which was done up in a simple bun. The face was rather long and thin; the build slender; the overall impression That of a tidy, clean, graceful person.

'Do you belong here then?' he asked her.

'Yes.' She seemed amused.

'If you do, how is it that I've never seen you before?'

She replied with some bitterness:

'There are quite a few of us you've never seen. I'm not the only one, by any means. How *could* you have seen me? I've never been allowed to wait on you or show myself in your presence.'

'Why not?'

'I don't think it's for me to say.—Oh, there's something I *do* have to tell you, though. Yesterday a gentleman calling himself "Yun" came to see you. I thought you probably wouldn't be able to see him at the time, so I told Tealeaf to ask him round this morning. Unfortunately by the time he came, you'd already gone off to see the Prince—'

Their conversation was interrupted by the giggles of Ripple and Emerald who had just entered the courtyard with a large bucket of water. Each of them held the bucket by one hand and lifted her skirts up with the other. They were staggering under the unaccustomed weight and slopping a good deal of the water about as they went. The maid hurried out to relieve them. By now the giggles had given way to recriminations:

'Look, you've soaked my dress!'

‘You trod on my toe!’

They stopped to look at this person who had just issued from the young Master’s room and saw with some surprise that it was Crimson. Putting down the water, they hurried indoors to look. Bao-yu was there on his own. The girls were indignant. As soon as they had prepared the bath and seen him undressed, they shut the door after them and hurried to the other side of the building to find Crimson.

‘What were you doing in his room just now?’ they asked her accusingly.

‘I wasn’t doing anything,’ said Crimson. ‘I couldn’t find my handkerchief, so I went to look for it round the back. He was calling for some tea and none of you happened to be about, so I ran in and poured it out for him. And just at that moment you came back.’

Ripple spat in her face:

‘Nasty, shameless little slut! When we asked you to fetch the water for us you said you were busy and made us go ourselves. You didn’t waste much time, having got him to yourself, did you? You think you’re on the way up, don’t you? Step by step. Well, we can catch up with you, my line lady! Why don’t you take a look at yourself in the mirror and t*hen* ask yourself if you’re a fit person to go serving tea to the Masters?’

‘We’d better warn the others that when he asks for tea or anything in future they must stay where they are and let *her* go and get it!’

‘In that case,’ said Ripple, ‘the rest of us may as well clear off and let her have him all to herself!’

They were still at their antiphonal taunting when an old woman arrived with a message from Xi-feng:

‘Someone is bringing some workmen in tomorrow to plant trees, so you have all got to be extra careful. No hanging clothes out to dry all over the place! There will be screens put up along the line of the embankment and you are not to go running around outside.’

‘Who’s the person in charge of the workmen?’ asked Ripple.

‘A young chap called “Yun” from up the Lane,’ said the old woman.

The name meant nothing to Ripple and Emerald, who went on to ask about other matters; but **Crimson** knew it must be the young man she had met the day before in the outer study.

Crimson’s surname was ‘Lin’. Her family had been retainers in the Jia family for generations. Nowadays her father worked as a farm-bailiff on the family’s estates. She was sixteen. Along with many other servants, she had originally entered the Prospect Garden to carry out caretaking duties in the period when it was still unoccupied. The part of it she was assigned to was the House of **Green** Delights. She found it a very beautiful place to live in—very quiet and secluded. But this had changed when Bao-yu and the girls were commanded to move in and Bao-yu had chosen the House of **Green** Delights as his own residence.

Although **Crimson** was a very inexperienced maid, she had a measure of good looks and a determination to better herself. She was therefore constantly on the look-out for an opportunity of making herself known to Bao-yu and showing off her ability to serve him. Unfortunately the little group of body-servants who had accompanied him into the garden guarded their privileges with tooth and claw and were careful to allow no toehold to an ambitious outsider. Today she had at last found an opening, only to have her hopes immediately dashed by Ripple’s malice. She felt very discouraged.

Still smarting with resentment, she heard the old woman say that Jia Yun was coming next day into the garden. The name provoked a momentary flutter in her breast; but she returned to her room with the same feeling of resentment bottled up inside her and went to bed to ponder moodily on the events of the day. As the thoughts pursued themselves round and round in her mind without object or conclusion, she suddenly heard her name being called very softly outside her window:

‘Crimson! Crim! I’ve found your handkerchief!’ She quickly got up and went outside to look. To her surprise it was Jia Yun. A maidenly confusion mantled her comely cheek.

‘Where did you find it?’ she asked timidly.

Jia Yun laughed:

‘Come over here and I’ll show you!’
He took hold of her dress to pull her to him. Overcome with shame, she turned and fled, but her foot caught on the threshold and she fell on her face.
The conclusion of this adventure will be revealed in the following chapter.

CHAPTER 25

Two cousins are subjected by witchcraft to
the assaults of demons
And the Magic Jade meets an old acquaintance while
rather the worse for wear

We have seen how Crimson, after lying a long time a prey to confused and troubled thoughts, at last dozed off to sleep; and how later, when Jia Yun grabbed at her, she turned and fled, only to stumble and fall on the threshold of her room. At that point she woke in bed and discovered that she had been dreaming. She did not get to sleep again after that, but lay tossing restlessly throughout the night.
When daylight came at last, she got up, and shortly after was joined by the other maids who shared with her the early morning duties of sweeping the rooms and courtyards and fetching water for the others’ washing.
Crimson’s own toilet was a simple one: a brief look in the mirror while she coiled her hair, a quick wash) and she was ready to join the others in their sweeping.
Her encounter with Bao-yu had made a stronger impression on that impressionable young man than she realized. He had even thought of asking for her by name to wait upon him, but hesitated, partly from fear of offending Aroma and the rest) and partly because he did not know what she was really like and dreaded the unpleasantness of sending her away again if she proved unsatisfactory. The question still preoccupied him when he woke that morning. He rose quite early and sat musing silently on his own, making no effort to begin his toilet.
In a little while the paper-covered shutters were removed and he was able to see clearly through the silken gauze of the casement into the courtyard outside. He could see several girls there sweeping, all of them heavily made-up and with flowers and ornaments in their hair, but no sign of the quiet, neat girl of the day before. He went outside in his slippers to look around, pretending that he had gone out to inspect the flowers. He could see someone leaning on the balustrade in the south-west corner of the cloister-like covered walk, but she was half hidden by the crab-apple tree and he could not make out who it was. He approached and looked more closely. It was she, yesterday’s girl, standing there on her own, apparently lost in thought. He was a little shy of ad-dressing her at that particular moment and was still hesitating when Emerald came up and asked him to come in and wash. He had to go in again without having spoken to her.
While **Crimson** stood there musing, she suddenly became aware that Aroma was beckoning to her, and hurried up to see what she wanted.
‘Our spittoon is broken,’ Aroma said. ‘Can you go to Miss Lin’s and ask them if they will lend us one until we can get a replacement?’
Crimson hurried off in the direction of the Naiad’s House. When she got to **Green** Haze Bridge, she stopped a moment to look around. She noticed that cloth screens had been set up all along the side of the artificial hill, and remembered that this was the day on which the workmen were coming into the garden to plant trees. She could just make out a knot of workmen digging a hole in the distance and Jia Yun sitting on some rocks supervising them. She would have liked to go over, but did not quite dare, and having collected the spittoon, returned, in very low spirits, and lay down in her own room to brood. The others all assumed that she must be feeling unwell and took no notice.

*

Next day was the birthday of Wang Zi-teng's lady. A message had already been received from that quarter inviting Grandmother Jia and Lady Wang to spend the day with her. Lady Wang would have liked to go but felt unable, even though the invitation was from her brother's wife, because she could see that Grandmother Jia did not want to. Wang Zi-teng's other. sister, Aunt Xue, went instead, together with his niece Xi-feng, Bao-chai, Bao-yu and the three Jia girls. They did not return until the evening.

Not long before they returned, Jia Huan got back from school and Lady Wang gave him the task of copying out the text of that prolonger of life and highly efficacious prophylactic against sickness and misfortune, the *Dharani of the Immaculate Diamond.* He seated himself on Lady Wang's kang, called for a candle to be lit, and, with a great deal of self-important fuss, began his copying, one minute calling for Suncloud to pour him tea, the next requiring Silver to trim the wick of his candle, and shortly after that informing G6lden ?hat she was standing in his light. The maids all hated Jia Huan and took no notice—all, that is, except Sunset, who had always had a soft spot for him. She poured him a cup of tea and, observing that Lady Wang was engaged in conversation with someone elsewhere in the apartment, quietly counselled some restraint:

'Try not to throw your weight about so!' she said. 'It's silly to put people's backs up.'

Jia Huan scowled angrily:

'I know what I'm doing,' he said. 'I)on't talk to me like a child! You're friends with Bao-yu nowadays, aren't you? You don't like me any more. I know. I've watched you both.'

Sunset clenched her teeth. She stabbed the air above his head with her finger:

'You ungrateful thing! You're like the dog that bit Lü Dong-bin: you don't know a friend when you see one.'

They were still exchanging words when Xi-feng came in, having just got back from the birthday party. Lady Wang wanted to know about the other ladies who had been invited, whether the plays had been any good, and what sort of things they had had to eat and drink.

In a little while Bao-yu, too, arrived, and after a few respectful words to his mother, asked the servants to take off his headband and gown for him and help him off with his boots. Disencumbered, he flung himself into his mother's bosom to be fondled and petted by her, then, worming his way up and nuzzling affectionately against her neck, he proceeded to add his own amusing commentary on the day's events.

'You've been drinking again, child,' said Lady Wang. 'Your face is burning. All this romping about will make you sick. Lie down quietly for a while over there!'

She made them bring him a head-rest). and he lay down behind her, towards the back of the kang. Sunset was instructed to massage him by gently patting his legs.

He tried to joke with Sunset as she knelt beside him, but she barely acknowledged his questions and answered frigidly, directing her eyes and all her attention upon Jia Huan. Bao-yu seized her hand:

'Come, my dear! You must take notice of me if I speak to you!'

He tugged at her hand as he spoke, but she snatched it from his grasp.

'If you do that again,' she said, 'I shall call out!'

Jia Huan heard every word of this exchange. He had always hated Bao-yu, and this flirting with Sunset—*his* Sunset—was the last straw. He must be revenged or burst. A moment's reflection suggested the means. He had only to feign a slight clumsiness of the hand and it was done. The candle, brimming with molten wax, toppled straight on to Bao-yu's face. There was a piercing cry, which made everyone else in the room jump. Quickly they brought standard lamps up from the floor below. By their light Bao-yu's face was seen to be covered all over in wax. Torn between anguish for him and anger with Jia Huan, Lady Wang urged the servants to remove it as quickly as possible, while alternately berating the other boy for his carelessness. Xi-feng scrambled up on to the

kang to help the servants, grumbling at Jia Huan as she did so:
'Huan, you are *the* most cack-handed creature I have ever met! You are simply not fit for decent company. I don't know why Aunt Zhao hasn't taught you better.'
Her words reminded Lady Wang that she had been abusing a Master in front of the servants. She ceased rebuking Jia Huan at once and, summoning Aunt Zhao, directed all her wrath upon that luckless concubine:

'This is a fine son you bore us, I must say! He is a black-hearted little monster! You might at least *try* to teach him better. But no. Time and again I have overlooked this sort of thing, but instead of feeling sorry, you glory in it. You think that when I do nothing, you have got the better of me.'

Aunt Zhao was obliged to swallow her anger and endure these taunts in silence. She climbed up onto the kang and made a show of helping the others with the injured boy. She looked at his face. The whole left side of it was badly blistered. It was a wonder that the eye had not been damaged. When Lady Wang saw it, she was both full of anguish for her son and at the same time, when she thought of the questioning to which she would inevitably be subjected by Grandmother jia and wondered what she would say, terrified on her own account. To relieve her fear she turned once more on Aunt Zhao. Then, after tongue-lashing the concubine, she comforted her beloved son and applied Antiphlogistic Ointment to the blistered part of his face.
'It does hurt a bit,' said Bao-yu when she asked him, 'but nothing very terrible. When Grandma asks about it) we had better tell her that *I* did it.'
'She'll blame the rest of us for not looking after you properly, even if you say you did it yourself,' said Xi-feng. 'There'll be a row, whatever you say.'
Lady Wang told them to see him back to his room. It was a great shock to Ar6ma and the other maids when they saw him.
Dai-yu had had a dull time of it with Bao-yu away all day, and in the course of the evening sent several times round to his room to inquire whether he was back yet. It was in this way that she heard about his scalding. She hurried round immediately to see for herself how he was.
She found him with a mirror in his hand, examining the extent of the damage. The entire left side of his face was thickly plastered with ointment, from which she deduced that the injury must be a serious one. But when she approached him to look closer, he averted his head and waved her away. He knew how squeamish she was, and feared that the sight of it would upset her. Dai-yu for her part was sufficiently aware of her own weakness not to insist on looking. She merely asked him 'whether it hurt very badly'
'Not so bad as all that,' said Bao-yu. 'A couple of days and it will probably be all right again.'
Dai-yu sat with him a little longer and then went back to her room.
Next day Bao-yu had to see Grandmother Jia. Although he told her that he had burned himself through his own careless-ness, the old lady, as had been predicted, berated his attendants for having allowed the accident to happen.

Another day went by, and Bao-yu's godmother, old Mother Ma, called round. Mother Ma was a Wise Woman. Her special relationship with Bao-yu had been arranged in his infancy to ensure him the protection of her powers. She was shocked by her godson's appearance and, on being informed of the cause, shook her head and tutted sympathetically. She made a few signs over his face with her fingers, muttering some gibberish as she did so, after which she assured them that he would soon be better the malignant aura that had caused the accident was of a transitory, impermanent nature. She turned to Grandmother Jia:
'Bless you, my lucky lady! Bless you dearie! You don't know a half of the unseen harms and dangers the Scripture tells us of. All the sons of princes and great folks the moment they begin to grow up are f6llowed round everywhere they go by troops of invisible little imps—spiteful little creatures who nip them and pinch them whenever they can. Some-times they knock the rice bowl from their hands when they're eating. Sometimes they push them over when they are walking. It's on account of these creatures that so many young gentlemen of good family don't live to make old bones.'

Grandmother Jia was anxious to know if the afflicted person could be freed from these unwelcome attentions.

'Easily,' said Mother Ma. 'By doing good works. Giving a bit more to charity on the young person's behalf. There is another way, though. According to what the Scripture says, there's a Bodhisattva of Universal Light living in the Paradise of the West who spends his time lighting up the dark places where these evil spirits lurk, and if any believer, male or female, will make offerings to that Bodhisattva in a proper spirit of devoutness, he will grant their children and grand-children his holy peace and protect them from possession by devils and from the powers of darkness.'

'What sort of offerings do you make to this Bodhisattva?' Grandmother Jia asked her.

'Nothing very special. Apart from the usual incense offerings, we take a few pounds of sesame oil each day and make what we call a "sea of light" by burning wicks in it. We believe that this sea of light is the trans-substantial body of the Bodhisattva. It has to be kept burning night and day and never allowed to go out.'

'How much oil does it take to keep it burning for one whole day and night?' said Grandmother Jia. 'I should like to do this for the boy.'

'There's no fixed amount,' said Mother Ma. 'We leave it to our clients to decide how much they *want* to give. There are several members of the aristocracy among those I do this service for. Let's see .. . There's the Prince of An-nan's lady. She's my biggest subscriber. Her subscription is for forty-eight pounds of oil and a pound of lampwicks a day. *Her* sea of light is pretty nearly as big as a cistern. Then there's the Marquis of Jin-xiang's lady: twenty pounds of oil a day. Oh, and there's some pays for ten pounds a day, some for eight pounds, three pounds, five pounds- all sorts. All of them I keep their seas of light burning for them, back at my house.'

Grandmother Jia nodded thoughtfully.

'One thing I should mention,' said Mother Ma (observing the thoughtfulness): 'if the offering is for an older person—a mother or father, say—it doesn't matter *how* much you subscribe; but if it's an older person making it for a younger one, like as it may be Your Ladyship for Bao-yu, you don't want to subscribe too much, or it would overload his luck and have the opposite effect. In the case of Your Ladyship subscribing for Bao-yu, I should suggest between five and seven pounds a day.'

'Make it five pounds a day, then,' said Grandmother Jia. 'We'll work out the total and send you a month's supply every month.'

'Amitabha, Merciful Buddha! Bless His Holy Name!' said Mother Ma.

As a further precaution Grandmother Jia called in some of Bao-yu's maids and told them that in future whenever Bao-yu went out anywhere his pages were to be provided with several strings of cash to give as alms to any itinerant monks or priests or any poor or afflicted persons they might meet upon the way.

After seeing Grandmother jia, Mother Ma drifted round the mansion calling at various other apartments. Presently she came to Aunt Zhao's room. After they had exchanged greetings, Aunt Zhao told her little servant to pour the old woman a cup of tea. Aunt Zhao was pasting pieces of cloth together for soling shoes with, and Mother Ma observed that the kang around her was piled with miscellaneous remnants *of* material.

'I'm looking for something to make a pair of uppers out of, dearie,' said Mother Ma. 'I suppose you haven't got an old bit of silk or an old bit of satin that would do? It doesn't matter about the colour.'

Aunt Zhao heaved a long-suffering sigh:

'Take a look at this lot! You won't find anything much worth having here. Nothing worth having in this family ever comes *my* way. But you're welcome to pick out a couple of pieces *if* you don't mind the poor quality.'

Mother Ma rummaged around *in* the heap, and having picked out several pieces, stuffed them into her sleeve.

'I sent someone round to you the other day with five hundred cash to pay for an offering to the Medicine Buddha,' said Aunt Zhao. 'Have you managed to make it yet?'

‘Oh yes. That was done days ago.’

‘Holy Name!’ said Aunt Zhao. ‘I’d do it oftener if things were a bit easier; but you know the saying: “my heart is willing but my purse is lean”.’

‘Don’t you worry about that!’ said Mother Ma. ‘You only have to hold out a few more years. When your Huan has grown up and got himself a job in the Service, you’ll be able to afford all the good works you want.’

Aunt Zhao made a scornful sound in her nose:

‘Hfn! Let’s not talk about it! It’ll be no different then from what it is now: Huan and I will never be able to compete with the Other One. It’s like the Heavenly Dragon appearing when *he* comes on the scene. Mind you, I don’t hold it against the child. He’s a good-looking boy, is Bao-yu, and you can understand the grown-ups being silly about him. No, th*is* is the one I can’t stand.’

As she uttered the word ‘this’, she held up two fingers. Mother Ma guessed her meaning: ‘Number Two’—the younger of the Rong mansion’s two daughters-in-law.

‘You mean Mrs Lian?’ she said.

Aunt Zhao’s face assumed an expression of terror. Motioning agitatedly to the other to remain silent, she got up, went to the door, raised the door-blind, looked around, and having satisfied herself that there were no eavesdroppers, came back and sat down again, her face close to Mother Ma’s.

‘She’s a dreadful person—*dreadful!* If that woman doesn’t end up by carrying off every stick of property belonging to this family to line her own nest with, my name’s not Zhao!’

Mother Ma sensed interesting possibilities in this conversation, and was quick to explore them:

‘It doesn’t need you to tell me that,’ she said. ‘You surely don’t think I haven’t noticed *that?* I’ve often wondered why you all let her get away with it—though I suppose it’s probably just as well you do.’

‘My dear good woman,’ said Aunt Zhao, ‘we’ve no choice but to let her get away with it. Who would ever have the nerve to stand up to *her?*

‘Well,’ said Mother Ma, ‘I don’t want to seem a trouble-maker, but if you don’t mind my saying so, you do all seem to have acted a hit helpless about her—not that I’m blaming you, mind. But I mean to say, even if you daren’t stand up to her *openly*, there are things you could do in secret. I’m surprised you haven’t thought of it before.’

To Aunt Zhao the words seemed to contain a hidden promise. She concealed her pleasure.

‘What do you mean: “things we could do in secret”?’ she said. ‘I’m willing enough to do them: it’s just that I’ve never met anyone who could tell me how. If you would show me the way, I’d pay you. I’d pay a lot.’

Mother Ma could see that they understood each other, but she was taking no chances.

‘Holy Name! Don’t ask me about things like that! I don’t touch that kind of business. No, no, no. That’s wicked.’

There you are!’ said Aunt Zhao. ‘That’s all the help I ever get. And I thought you were such a kind person, always helping those in trouble. Are you prepared to stand by and watch me and my Huan being made mincemeat of by that scheming woman? I suppose it’s because you think I wouldn’t pay you.’

‘If you was to say that I am too tender-hearted to stand by and watch you and your boy being wronged,’ said Mother Ma, ‘you would be saying no more nor less than the truth. But I don’t know what you mean about *pay*. What have *you* got that you could tempt me with, dearie, even if I *was* willing to do it for pay?’

Aunt Zhao observed that her opposition to the very idea of helping her in the desired way had considerably weakened.

‘For someone so clever,’ she said, ‘aren’t you being rather stupid? If you help me and it works, with the two of *them* safely out of the way, everything in this household will be ours. You’ll be able to ask for what you like. Fancy not thinking of that!’

Mother Ma lowered her head and reflected for a while in silence.

‘*When that* time comes and you’re safely landed,’ she said eventually, ‘you won’t want to have anything more to do with *me*, dearie—not when I’ve got no proof to show what I done for you.’

‘That’s no problem,’ said Aunt Zhao. ‘I’ve got a few taels put by of my own savings, and I’ve got some dresses, and there’s my jewellery. You can take some of each to be getting on with and I can give you an IOU promising to pay you so much later on. We can have a witness too, if you like.’

‘Are you sure?’

‘Why should I tell a lie?’ said Aunt Zhao, and summoned a trusted crone into whose ear she whispered instructions:

‘Ps-ps-ps-ps-ps-ps-ps-ps.’

The old crone nodded and went out, returning after a few minutes with a promissory note for five hundred taels of silver. Aunt Zhao made her mark on it and then went to the wardrobe to get out her savings. The white shine of silver and the signed and sealed IOU dispelled whatever residual doubts the Wise Woman may have entertained, for she seized and pocketed both with alacrity, giving hearty assurances of her aid as she did so; then, after rummaging for some time in the capacious waistband of her trousers, she fished out twelve little paper cut-out figures—ten of them demons with **green** faces and **red** hair and two of them plain human figures—and handed them to Aunt Zhao. Dropping her voice to a whisper, she instructed her to write the eight symbols of her victims’ nativity—two for the year, two for the month, two for the day and two for the hour—on each of the human figures, wrap five of the demons round each of them, and slip them somewhere under her victims’ beds.

‘That’s all you have to do,’ she said. ‘1 shall be doing other things at home to help you. It’s sure to work - no question of that. But you must be very, very careful. And you mustn’t be afraid.’

While she was still talking, one of Lady Wang’s maids came in looking for her.

‘Oh, here you are! Her Ladyship is waiting for you.’ Mother Ma went off in the company of the maid.

And there we leave her.

*

Because of the injury to his face, Bao-yu had stopped going out of doors since his accident and Dai-yu spent a good deal 6f time in his apartment talking to him.

One morning after lunch she had settled down to read, but after a couple of chapters grew bored with the book and did some sewing instead with the maids Nightingale and Snowgoose. When that, too, became boring, she stood for a while leaning against the doorway, vacantly looking out. The young bamboo shoots were just breaking through in the forecourt, and after inspecting them, she drifted out into the Garden. Everywhere the flowers were blooming, the birds were singing, and the water splashed and tinkled, but not a human soul was to be seen. Almost without thinking where she was going, she made her way to the House of **Green** Delights. A group of maids had fetched some water from the well and were watching the white-eyes in the gallery giving themselves a bath. A sound of laughter came from inside the house. Li Wan, Xi-feng and Bao-chai were there already. Their friendly laughter greeted Dai-yu as she entered:

‘Another one! Come in! Come in!’

‘What *is* this?’ said Dai-yu, joining in the good humour. ‘A party?’

‘I sent someone round to you the other day with two caddies-full of tea,’ said Xi-feng, ‘but you were out.’

‘Yes,’ said Dai-yu. ‘I’m sorry: I forgot to thank you.’

‘Have you tried it?’ said Xi-feng. ‘What did you think of it?’

‘I wouldn’t ask, if I were you,’ said Bao-yu, chipping in. ‘*I* thought it was rotten. I don’t know what the rest of you thought about it.’

‘I thought the flavour was all right,’ said Bao-chai. ‘The colour wasn’t up to much.’

‘That was tribute tea from Siam,’ said Xi-feng. *‘I* didn’t like it at all. I thought it wasn’t as nice as the tea we drink every day.’

‘Oh, I quite liked it,’ said Dai-yu. ‘Your palates must be more sensitive than mine.’

‘If you really like it,’ said Bao-yu, ‘you’re welcome to have mine.

‘I’ve still got quite a bit left,’ said Xi-feng. ‘If you *really* like it, you can have it all.’
‘Thank you very much,’ said Dai-yu. ‘I’ll send someone round to fetch it.’
‘No, don’t do that,’ said Xi-feng. ‘I’ll send it round to *you*. There’s something I want you to do for me. The person I send round about it can bring the tea as well.’
Dai-yu laughed mockingly:
‘Do you heat that, everybody? Because she’s given me a hit of her old tea, I have to start doing odd jobs for her.’
‘That’s fair enough,’ said Xi-feng. ‘You know the rule:
“drink the family’s tea, the family’s bride-to-be”.’

Everyone laughed at this except Dai-yu, who turned her head away, blushing furiously, and said nothing.
‘Cousin Feng will have her little joke,’ Li Wan observed to Bao-chai with a smile.
‘Do you call that *a joke?*’ said Dai-yu. ‘It was a silly, idle remark, and very irritating.’
She gave a snort of disgust by way of reinforcement.
Xi-feng laughed:
‘What’s so irritating about it? Look at him!’—She pointed at Bao-yu - ‘Isn’t he good enough for you? Good looks, good family, good income. There are no snags that *I* can see. It’s a perfect match!’
Dai-yu rose and fled.
‘Oh, Frowner’s in a rage! Come back Frowner!’ Bao-chai called out after her. ‘If you go, it will spoil all the fun.’
She got up and went after Dai-yu to bring her back. At the doorway they ran into Jia Zheng’s two concubines, Aunt Zhao and Aunt Zhou, come to see Bao-yu. Li Wan, Bao-chai and Bao-yu made them welcome and invited them to sit down and talk, but Xi-feng and Dai-yu conversed with each other and rather pointedly ignored them, Bao-chai was in the middle of saying something to the rest of the group when a maid arrived from Lady Wang’s to say that Wang Zi-teng’s wife had come and the presence of the young ladies was requested. Li Wan and Xi-feng rose to go. Aunt Zhao and Aunt Zhou hurriedly took their leave.
‘I can’t go out,’ said Bao-yu. ‘For heaven’s sake don’t let Aunt Wang come over here! - Cousin Lint’ he called to Dai-yu. ‘Stay here a bit! There’s something I want to say to you.’
Hearing him, Xi-feng turned back to address Dai-yu:
‘Do you hear that? Someone wants a word with you. You’d better go back and see what he wants to say!’
She gave her a push in the direction of the house; then she and Li Wan went off, both laughing.
When they were alone together, Bao-yu took Dai-yu by the hand. He smiled and smiled, but said nothing. Dai-yu felt herself blushing, and tried to break away.
‘Aiyo!’ he said. ‘My head!’
‘Good!’ said Dai-yu. ‘It serves you right!’
Then Bao-yu let out a dreadful cry, lumped two or three feet into the air, and began to shout and babble deliriously. Dai-yu and the maids were terrified and ran to tell Lady Wang and Grandmother Jia. Wang Zi-teng’s lady was with them and hurried over with the rest to see him. By the time they arrived he had already tried several times to kill himself and was raving like a madman. His mother and grandmother were so stricken by the sight that for a few moments they stood mute and trembling. Then, breaking into loud weeping, they cried Out to him piteously between their sobs: ‘my son I’, ‘my child!’, ‘my darling!’
Soon the news had spread to the other parts of the Rong household and to the household next door and Jia She, Lady Xing, Cousin Zhen, Jia Zheng, Jia Lian, Jia Rong, Jia Yun, Jia Ping, Aunt Xue and Xue Pan—not to mention Zhou Rui’s wife and a great bevy of domestics both high and low—came hurrying into the garden, adding numbers and confusion to the group of helpless spectators.
While they were still wondering what to do with Bao-yu, Xi-feng appeared, brandishing a gleaming knife in one hand and attacking whatever came in her path. She had already massacred several luckless dogs and hens and now, seeing people ahead, glared at them madly and would have rushed upon them too had not Zhou Rui’s wife and a few hefty and resourceful women servants advanced upon her while the others looked on helplessly,

clasped her about the arms and body, wrested the knife from her hand, and carried her off to her room. Patience and Felicity wept piteously to see their mistress in such a state.

On this occasion even Jia Zheng's customary impassivity seemed to have deserted him, as he turned this way and that, uncertain on whom to direct his attention. And if Jia Zheng was distraught, the state of the others can be imagined. Most remarkable, perhaps, was the. spectacle of Xue Pan fussing over his womenfolk, one moment afraid that his mother would be jostled in the crush, the next that Bao-chai might be ogled or Caltrop glad-eyed by some wanton male. Cousin Zhen, he knew for a fact, was a notorious womanizer. Then he caught sight of Dai-yu (whom he had never seen before) and forgot his anxiety in gawping admiration of that ethereal beauty.

Although no one knew what to do themselves, there were a great many opinions about what *ought* to *be done.* Some said an exorcist should be called in to *expel* the malignant spirits, some that it required a dancing medium to *draw* them out, some offered charm-sheets invoking the demon-quelling powers of the Heavenly Master and issued under the hand of the Taoist pontiff; yet in spite of prayers, incantations, divination, and all the expedients that faith and physic could provide, there was no visible improvement in the condition of the patients. At sundown Wang Zi-teng's lady took her leave and went home.

Next day she made another visit to inquire after them. This was followed by Visits from the wife of Grandmother Jia's nephew the Marquis, from Lady Xing's brothers' wives, and from the wives of other marriage connections of the family. Bottled charm-water, wonder-working monks and Taoists and highly recommended physicians were also sent round to the mansion by various friends and relations.

But the cousins continued delirious and lay on their beds burning with fever and babbling incomprehensibly. At nightfall they became even worse, so that the maids and even the older women no longer dared go near them. The two of them had to be carried into Lady Wang's room on their beds and set down there side by side so that Jia Yun and a group of pages could watch over them in shifts throughout the night. Grandmother Jia, Lady Wang, Lady Xing and Aunt Xue stayed near at hand, refusing to budge, though unable to do anything but sit by and weep. Jia She and Jia Zheng, afraid that their mother's health would suffer, displayed their concern by keeping themselves and everyone else up throughout most of the night. There were lights burning everywhere and hardly anyone slept at all.

Jia She continued to hunt everywhere for monks and exorcists reputed able to cure diseases of the mind. Finally, Jia Zheng, who saw that their methods were all useless, lost patience with him and tried to make him stop:

'Young people will die if they must. Nothing can alter fate. And that they are fated to die would appear from the fact that all efforts to cure them have been unavailing. I think we should allow them to die in peace.'

But Jia She took no notice, and the commotion continued as before.

By the third day the patients were so weakened that they lay on their beds motionless and their breathing was scarcely perceptible. The whole family had by now abandoned hope and were already making preparations for their laying-out. Grandmother Jia, Lady Wang, Jia Lian, Patience and Aroma had cried themselves into a state bordering on prostration. Only Aunt Zhao was cheerful—though she did her best to look miserable.

Early on the fourth day Bao-yu suddenly opened his eyes wide and spoke to Grandmother Jia:

'From now on I can no longer stay in this family. You must get my things ready and let me go.'

To the old lady the words were a tearing of heart from body; but Aunt Zhao, who also heard them, had the temerity to urge their acceptance:

'Your Ladyship shouldn't take it so hard. It's already all up with the boy. We should be getting his grave clothes ready so that he can go in peace. It will be better that way. If we won't let him go now, when he's ready, it will only make more suffering for him in the world to come

She would have gone on, but Grandmother Jia spat in her face. No empty gesture: it was a full gob of spittle.

'Evil woman! May your tongue rot! How do you *know* it's all up with him? You *want* him to die, don't you? But if you think you will gain by his death, you must be dreaming; because if he does die, I shall hold you responsible. It's your spiteful meddling that has forced him to do all this studying. You have reduced the poor

child to such a state that the mere sight of his father makes him more scared than a mouse with the cat after it. *You* have done this, you and the others of your kind. And now I suppose, if you succeed in murdering him, you will be satisfied. But don't imagine you will escape me—*any* of you!'

She railed and wept. Jia Zheng was close at hand while she was saying all this and was deeply distressed by it. Peremptorily dismissing the concubine, he tried to calm his mother and reasoned against the injustice of her charges.

It was unfortunate that just at that moment a servant should have come in to announce that 'the two coffins that had been ordered were now ready'. The words were as oil upon fire. The old lady blazed.

'Who gave orders for those coffins to be made? Where is the man who made them? Go and get the man who made those coffins! Flog him to death!'

Suddenly, as she raged and stormed, the faint *tock tock* of a holy man's wooden fish was heard upon the air and a high monotone chant that kept time with the beat:

'Na-mah A-mi-ta-bha Bo-dhi-satt-va!
Mer-ci-ful de-li-ve-rer!
All a-fflic-ted and tor-men-ted,
All a-ttacked by e-vil spi-rits,
All de-mo-ni-ac po-sse-ssion,
I cure,
I cure,
I cure.'

Grandmother Jia and Lady Wang at once sent someone into the street to see who it was. The source of the chanting proved to be a disreputable-looking Buddhist monk. Stone describes him in the following quatrain:

A bottle nose he had and shaggy brows,
Through which peeped eyes that twinkled like bright Stats.
His robe was patched and torn, his feet straw-shod,
His unclean pate blotched with unsightly scars.

He was accompanied by a lame Taoist, for whom a similar quatrain has been supplied by our poetical *Stone:*

Up, down he hopped on his unequal legs,
From mud and puddle not a stitch left dry.
Yet, if you asked him where his dwelling was,
'Westward of Paradise' he would reply.

Jia Zheng had them invited in and asked them what monastery they were from. The monk was genially dismissive:

'There is no need for Your Worship to waste time on formalities. Suffice it to say that I heard you had sickness in this house and have come to cure it.

'Two members of this family have, indeed, fallen victims to some kind of witchcraft,' said Jia Zheng. 'Might one inquire what charm you intend to cure them with?'

'Charm?' The monk laughed. 'You already possess in your own house a precious object capable of curing them. What other charm is necessary?'

Jia Zheng gave a start.

'To be sure. My son was born with a piece of jade whose inscription makes some such claim - "Dispels the harms

of witchcraft". But as you see, it does not appear to possess the power it lays claim to.'
'That is because the world and its temptations have con-fused it,' said the monk. 'It certainly *used* to have the power. If you will have the goodness to fetch it for me and allow me to hold it in my hand and say a wee prayer over it, I think I can undertake to bring the power back again.'
Jia Zheng took the Magic Jade from Bao-yu's neck and handed it to the monk, who held it on the palm of his hand and addressed it with a sigh:
'Thirteen years, old friend, since we first met under **Green**-sickness Peak! Time certainly flies. But you have not finished with this world yet, you know. Dear, dear, dear! You aren't the Stone you were, are you?

—Time was you lived in perfect liberty,
Your heart alike from joy and sorrow free,
Till, by the smelter's alchemy transformed,
Into the world you came to purchase misery.

By the bye, I am sorry you have been having such a disagreeable experience these last few days.

—Vain sensual joys the jade's sheen have besmirched;
The poor bird droops, in its close prison perched.
From drunken dreaming one day you'll recover:
Then, when all debts are paid, the play will soon be over.'

When the monk had finished apostrophizing the stone, he rubbed it and polished it between his hands and muttered some strange-sounding words over it.
'There! Its power has now been restored.' He handed it back to Jia Zheng. 'But you must be careful that it does not become contaminated again. Hang it above the threshold of the bedroom and let no women apart from the patient's own mother and grandmother go inside. If you will do that, I can guarantee a complete recovery in thirty-three days.'
Jia Zheng would have liked to detain the monk for tea and offer him some remuneration, but he and the Taoist slipped quietly away and could not be traced.
The monk's directions were scrupulously followed. Lady Wang guarded the doorway in person and prevented any unauthorized person from getting into the bedroom. By evening the sufferers had regained consciousness and said they were hungry. This news, so precious to the ears of Lady Jia and Lady Wang, who at once had rice gruel brought in to feed them with, was relayed to the girls in the outer room.

'Bless His Holy Name!' Dai-yu murmured fervently.
Bao-chai laughed, but said nothing. The others were mystified.
'Why do you laugh, Cousin Bao?' Xi-chun asked her.
'I was thinking how busy He of the Holy Name must be,' Bao-chai said. 'Apart from working for the salvation of all sentient beings, He has to protect the sick and hasten their recovery—not to mention watching over plighted couples to make sure that they marry and live happily ever after. What a lot He has to keep Him busy! Don't you find the thought rather amusing ?'

Dai-yu affected scorn, but was blushing hotly.

'You are all horrid. Instead of following good examples, you all imitate Feng and make nasty, cheap jokes all the time.'

She raised the portiere and went out.

But if you wish to know more, you will have to wait for the next chapter.

CHAPTER 26

A conversation on Wasp Waist Bridge is a cover for
communication of a different kind
And a soliloquy overhead in the Naiad's House reveals
unsuspected depths of feeling

By the time the thirty-three days' convalescence had ended, not only were Bao-yu's health and strength completely restored, but even the burn-marks on his face had vanished, and he was allowed to move back into the Garden

It may be recalled that when Bao-yu's sickness was at its height, it had been found necessary to call in Jia Yun with a number of pages under his command to take turns in watching over him. **Crimson** was there too at that time, having been brought in with the other maids from his apartment. During those few days she and Jia Yun therefore had ample opportunity of seeing each other, and a certain familiarity began to grow up between them.

Crimson noticed that Jia Yun was often to be seen sporting a handkerchief very much like the one she had lost. She nearly asked him about it, but in the end was too shy. Then, after the monk's visit, the presence of the menfolk was no longer required and Jia Yun went back to his tree-planting. Though **Crimson** could still not dismiss the matter entirely from her mind, she did not ask anyone about it for fear of arousing their suspicions.

A day or two after their return to **Green** Delights, **Crimson** was sitting in her room, still brooding over this handkerchief business, when a voice outside the window inquired whether she was in. Peeping through an eyelet in the casement she recognized Melilot, a little maid who belonged to the same apartment as herself.

'Yes, I'm in,' she said. 'Come inside!'

Little Melilot came bounding in and sat down on the bed with a giggle.

'I'm in luck I' she said. 'I was washing some things in the yard when Bao-yu asked for some tea to be taken round to Miss Lin's for him and Miss Aroma gave *me* the job of taking it. When I got there, Miss Lin had just been given some money by Her Old Ladyship and was sharing it out among her maids, so when she saw me she just said "Here you are!" and gave me two big handfuls of it. I've no idea how much it is. Will you look after it for me, please?'

She undid her handkerchief and poured out a shower of coins. **Crimson** carefully counted them for her and put them away in a safe place.

'What's been the matter with you lately?' said Melilot. 'If you ask me, 1 think you ought to go home for a day or two and call in a doctor. I expect you need some medicine.'

'Silly!' said Crimson. 'I'm perfectly all right. What should I want to go home for?'

'I know what, then,' said Melilot. 'Miss Lin's very weakly. She's always taking medicine. Why don't you ask her to give you some of hers? It would probably do just as well.'

'Oh, nonsense!' said Crimson. 'You can't take other people's medicines just like that!'

'Well, you can't go on in this way,' said Melilot, 'never eating or drinking properly. What will become of you?

'Who *cares?'* said Crimson. 'The sooner I'm dead the better!'

'You shouldn't say such things,' said Melilot, 'It isn't right.'

'Why not?' said Crimson. 'How do you know what is on my mind?

Melilot sho6k her head sympathetically.

'I can't say I really blame you,' she said. 'Things *are* very difficult here at times. Take yesterday, for example. Her Old Ladyship said that as Bao-yu was better now and there was to be a thanksgiving for his recovery, all those who had the trouble of nursing him during his illness were to be rewarded according to their grades. Well

now, I can understand the very young ones like me not being included, but why should they leave you out? I felt really sorry for you when I heard that they'd left you out. Aroma, of course, you'd expect to get more than anyone else. I don't blame *her* at all. In fact, I think it's owing to her. Let's be honest: none of us can compare with Aroma. I mean, even if she didn't always take so much trouble over everything, no one would want to quarrel about *her* having a bigger share. What makes me so angry is that people like Skybright and Mackerel should count as top grade when everyone knows they're only put there to curry favour with Bao-yu. Doesn't it make you angry?'

'I don't see much point in getting angry,' said Crimson. 'You know what they said about the mile-wide marquee: "Even the longest party must have an end"? Well, none of us is here for ever, you know. Another four or five years from now when we've each gone our different ways it won't *matter* any longer what all the rest of us are doing.'

Little Melilot found this talk of parting and impermanence vaguely affecting and a slight moisture was to be observed about her eyes. She thought shame to cry without good cause, however, and masked her emotion with a smile:

'That's perfectly true. Only yesterday Bao-yu was going on about all the things he's going to do to his rooms and the clothes he's going to have made and everything, just as if he had a hundred or two years ahead of him with nothing to do but kill time in.'

Crimson laughed scornfully, though whether at Melilot's simplicity or at Bao-yu's improvidence is unclear, since just as she was about to comment, a little maid came running in, so young that her hair was still done up in two little girl's horns. She was carrying some patterns and sheet of paper.

'You're to copy out these two patterns.'

She threw them in Crimson's direction and straightway darted out again. **Crimson** shouted after her:

'Who are they for, then? You might at least finish your message before rushing off. What are you in such a tearing hurry about? Is someone steaming wheatcakes for you and you're afraid they'll get cold?'

'They're for Mackerel.' The little maid paused long enough to bawl an answer through the window, then picking up her heels, went pounding off, *plim-plam, plim-plam, p/imp/am*, as fast as she had come.

Crimson threw the patterns crossly to one side and went to hunt in her drawer for a brush to trace them with. After rummaging for several minutes she had only succeeded in finding a few worn-out ones, too moulted for use.

'Funny!' she said. 'I could have sworn I put a new one in there the other day ...

She thought a bit, then laughed at herself as she remembered:

'Of course. Oriole took it, the evening before last.' She turned to Melilot. 'Would you go and get it for me, then?'

'I'm afraid I can't,' said Melilot. 'Miss Aroma's waiting for me to fetch some boxes for her. You'll have to get it your-self.'

'If Aroma's waiting for you, why have you been sitting here gossiping all this time?' said Crimson. 'If I hadn't asked you to go and get it, she wouldn't have been waiting, would she? Lazy little beast!'

She left the room and walked out of the gate of **Green** Delights and in the direction of Bao-chai's courtyard. She was just passing by Drenched Blossoms Pavilion when she caught sight of Bao-yu's old wet-nurse, Nannie Li, coming from the opposite direction and stood respectfully aside to wait for her.

'Where have you been, Mrs Li?' she asked her. 'I didn't expect to see you here.'

Nannie Li made a flapping gesture with her hand:

'What do you think, my dear: His Nibs has taken a fancy to the young fellow who does the tree-planting—"Yin" or "Yun" or whatever his name is—so Nannie has to go and ask him in. Let's hope Their Ladyships don't find out about it. There'll be trouble if they do.'

'Are you really going to ask him in?'

'Yes. Why?'

Crimson laughed:
'If your Mr Yun knows what's good for him, he won't agree to come.'
'He's no fool,' said Nannie Li. 'Why shouldn't he?'
'Any way, if he *does* come in,' said Crimson, ignoring her question, 'you can't just bring him in and then leave him, Mrs Li. You'll have to take him back again yourself afterwards. You don't want him wandering off on his own. There's no knowing *who* he might bump into.'
(**Crimson** herself, was the secret hope.)
'Gracious me! I haven't got *that* much spare time,' said Nannie *Li.* 'All I've done is just to tell him that he's got to come. I'll send someone else to fetch him in when I get back presently - one of the girls, or one of the older women, maybe.'
She hobbled off on her stick, leaving **Crimson** standing there in a muse, her mission to fetch the tracing-brush momentarily forgotten. She was still standing there a minute or two later when a little maid came along, who, seeing that it was Crimson, asked her what she was doing there. **Crimson** looked up. It was Trinket, another of the maids from **Green** Delights.
'Where are you going?' **Crimson** asked her.
'I've been sent to fetch Mr Yun,' said Trinket. 'I have to bring him inside to meet Master Bao.'
She ran off on her way.
At the gate to Wasp Waist Bridge **Crimson** ran into Trinket again, this time with Jia Yun in tow. His eyes sought Crimson's; and hers, as she made pretence of conversing with Trinket, sought his. Their two pairs of eyes met and briefly skirmished; then **Crimson** felt herself blushing, and turning away abruptly, she made off for Allspice Court.

*

Our narrative now follows Jia Yun and Trinket along the winding pathway to the House of **Green** Delights. Soon they were at the courtyard gate and Jia Yun waited outside while she went in to announce his arrival. She returned presently to lead him inside.
There were a few scattered rocks in the courtyard and some clumps of jade-**green** plantain. Two storks stood in the shadow of a pine-tree, preening themselves with their long bills. The gallery surrounding the courtyard was hung with cages of unusual design in which perched or fluttered a wide variety of birds, some of them gay-plumaged exotic ones. Above the steps was a little five-frame penthouse building with a glimpse of delicately-carved partitions visible through the open doorway, above which a horizontal board hung, inscribed with the words

CRIMSON JOYS AND GREEN DELIGHTS

'So that's why it's called "The House of **Green** Delights"' Jia Yun told himself. 'The name is taken from the inscription.'
A laughing voice addressed him from behind one of the silk gauze casements:
'Come on in! It must be two or three months since I first forgot our appointment!'
Jia Yun recognized the voice as Bao-yu's and hurried up the steps inside. He looked about him, dazzled by the brilliance of gold and semi-precious inlay-work and the richness of the ornaments and furnishings, but unable to see Bao-yu in the midst of it all. To the left of him was a full4ength mirror from behind which two girls now emerged, both about fifteen or sixteen years old and of much the same build and height. They addressed him by name and asked him to come inside. Slightly overawed, he muttered something in reply and hurried after them, not daring to take more than a furtive glance at them from the corner of his eye. They ushered him into a tent-like

summer ‘cabinet’ of **green** net, whose principal furniture was a tiny lacquered bed with **crimson** hangings heavily patterned in gold. On this Bao-yu, wearing everyday clothes and a pair of bedroom slippers, was reclining, book in hand. He threw the book down as Jia Yun entered and rose to his feet with a welcoming smile. Jia Yun swiftly dropped knee and hand to floor in greeting. Bidden to sit, he modestly placed himself on a bedside chair.

‘After I invited you round to my study that day,’ said Bao-yu, ‘a whole lot of things seemed to happen one after the other, and I’m afraid I quite forgot about your visit.’

Jia Yun returned his smile:

‘Let’s just say that it wasn’t my luck to see you then. But you have been ill since then, Uncle Bao. Are you quite better now?’

‘Quite better, thank you. I hear you’ve been very busy these last few days.’

‘That’s as it should be,’ said Jia Yun. ‘But I’m glad you are better, Uncle. That’s a piece of good fortune for *all* of us.’

As they chatted, a maid came in with some tea. Jia Yun was talking to Bao-yu as she approached, but his eyes were on her. She was tall and rather thin with a long oval face, and she was wearing a rose-**pink** dress over a closely pleated white satin skirt and a black satin sleeveless jacket over the dress.

In the course of his brief sojourn among them in the early days of Bao-yu’s illness, Jia Yun had got by heart the names of most of the principal females of Bao-yu’s establishment. He knew at a glance that the maid now serving him tea was Aroma. He was als6 aware that she was in some way more important than the other maids and that to be waited on by her in the seated presence of her master was an honour. Jumping hastily to his feet he addressed her with a modest smile:

‘You shouldn’t pour tea for *me*, Miss! I’m not like a visitor here. You should let me pour for myself!’

‘Oh *do* sit down!’ said Bao-yu. ‘You don’t have to be like that in front of the *maids* I’

‘I know,’ said Jia Yun. ‘But a body-servant! I don’t like to presume.’

He sat down, nevertheless, and sipped his tea while Bao-yu made conversation on a number of unimportant topics. He told him which household kept the best troupe of players, which had the finest gardens, whose maids were the prettiest, who gave the best parties, and who had the best collection of curiosities or the strangest pets. Jia Yun did his best to keep up with him. After a while Bao-yu showed signs of flagging, and when Jia Yun, observing what appeared to be fatigue, rose to take his leave, he did not very strongly press him to stay.

‘You must come again when you can spare the time,’ said Bao-yu, and ordered Trinket to see him out of the Garden.

Once outside the gateway of **Green** Delights, Jia Yun looked around him on all sides, and having ascertained that there was no one else about, slowed down to a more dawdling pace so that he could ask Trinket a few questions. Indeed, the little maid was subjected to quite a catechism: How old was she? What was her name? What did her father and mother do? How many years had she been working *for* his Uncle Bao? How much pay did she get a month? How many girls were there working for him altogether? Trinket seemed to have no objection, however, and answered each question as it came.

‘That girl you were talking to on the way in,’ he said, ‘isn’t her name “Crimson”?’

Trinket laughed:

‘Yes. Why do you ask?’

‘I heard her asking you about a handkerchief. Only it just so happens that I picked one up.’

Trinket showed interest.

‘She’s asked me about that handkerchief of hers a number of times. I told her, I’ve got better things to do with my time than go looking for people’s handkerchiefs. But when she asked me about it again today, she said that if I could find it for her, she’d give me a reward. Come to think of it, you were there when she said that, weren’t you? It was when we were outside the gate of Allspice Court. So you can bear me out. Oh Mr Jia, please let me have it if you’ve picked it up and I’ll be able to see what she will give me for it!’

Jia Yun had picked up a silk handkerchief a month previously at the time when his tree-planting activities had lust started. He knew that it must have been dropped by one or another of the female inmates of the Garden, but not knowing which, had not so far ventured to do anything about his discovery. When earlier on he had heard **Crimson** question Trinket about her loss, he had realized, with a thrill of pleasure, that the handkerchief he had picked up must have been hers. Trinket's request now gave him just the opening he required. He drew a handkerchief of his own from inside his sleeve and held it up in front of her with a smile:

'I'll give it to you on one condition. If she lets you have this reward you were speaking of; you've *got* to let me know. No cheating, mind!'

Trinket received the handkerchief with eager assurances that he would be informed of the outcome, and having seen him out of the Garden, went back again to look for Crimson.

*

Our narrative returns now to Bao-yu.

After disposing of *Jia* Yun, Bao-yu continued to feel extremely lethargic and lay back on the bed with every appearance of being about to doze off to sleep. Aroma hurried over to him and, sitting on the edge of the bed, roused him with a shake:

'Come on! Surely you are not going to sleep *again?* You need some fresh air. Why don't you go outside and walk around for a bit?'

Bao-yu took her by the hand and smiled at her.

'I'd like to go,' he said, 'but I don't want to leave you.'

'Silly!' said Aroma with a laugh. 'Don't say what you don't mean!'

She hoicked him to his feet.

'Well, where am I going to go then?' said Bao-yu. 'I just feel so *bored.'*

'Never mind where, just go out I' said Aroma. 'If you stay moping indoors like this, you'll get even more bored.'

Bao-yu followed her advice, albeit half-heartedly, and went out into the courtyard. After visiting the cages in the gallery and playing for a bit with the birds, he ambled out of the courtyard into the Garden and along the batik of Drenched Blossoms Stream, pausing for a while to look at the goldfish in the water. As he did so, a pair of fawns came running like the wind from the hillside opposite. Bao-yu was puzzled. There seemed to be no reason for their mysterious terror. But just then little Jia Lan came running down the same slope after them, a tiny bow clutched in his hand. Seeing his uncle ahead of him, he stood politely to attention and greeted him cheerfully:

'Hello, Uncle. I didn't know you were at home. I thought you'd gone out.'

'Mischievous little blighter, aren't you?' said Bao-yu. 'What do you want to go shooting them for, poor little things?'

'I've got no reading to do today,' said Jia Lan, 'and I don't like to hang about doing nothing, so I thought I'd practise my archery and equitation.'

'Goodness! You'd better not waste time jawing, then,' said Bao-yu, and left the young toxophilite to his pursuits.

Moving on, without much thinking where he was going, he came presently to the gate of a courtyard.

Denser than feathers on the phoenix' tail
The stirred leaves murmured with a pent dragon's moan.

The multitudinous bamboos and the board above the gate confirmed that his feet had, without conscious direction, carried him to the Naiad's House. Of their own accord they now carried him through the gateway and into the courtyard.

The House seemed silent and deserted, its bamboo door-blind hanging unrolled to the ground; but as he

approached the window, he detected a faint sweetness in the air, traceable to a thin curl of incense smoke which drifted out through the **green** gauze of the casement. He pressed his face to the gauze; but before his eyes could distinguish anything, his ear became aware of a long, languorous sigh and the sound of a voice speaking:

'Each day in a drowsy waking dream of love.'

Bao-yu felt a sudden yearning for the speaker. He could see her now It was Dai-yu, of course, lying on her bed, stretching herself and yawning luxuriously.

He laughed:

'Why "each day in a drowsy waking dream of love"?' he asked through the window (the words were from his beloved *Western Chamber);* then going to the doorway he lifted up the door-blind and walked into the room.

Dai-yu realized that she had been caught off her guard. She covered her burning face with her sleeve, and turning over towards the wall, pretended to be asleep. Bao-yu went over intending to turn her back again, but just at that moment Dai-yu's old wet-nurse came hurrying in with two other old women at her heels:

'Miss Lin's asleep, sir Would you mind coming back again after she's woken up?'

Dai-yu at once turned over and sat up with a laugh:

'Who's asleep?'

The three old women laughed apologetically.

'Sorry, miss. We thought you were asleep. Nightingale! Come inside now! Your mistress is awake.'

Having shouted for Nightingale, the three guardians of morality retired.

'What do you mean by coming into people's rooms when they're asleep?' said Dai-yu, smiling up at Bao-yu as she sat on the bed's edge patting her hair into shape.

At the sight of those soft cheeks so adorably flushed and the starry eyes a little misted with sleep a wave of emotion passed over him. He sank into a chair and smiled back at her:

'What was that you were saying just now before I came in?'

'I didn't say anything,' said Dai-yu.

Bao-yu laughed and snapped his fingers at her:

'Put that on your tongue, girl! I heard you say it.' While they were talking to one another, Nightingale came *In.*

'Nightingale,' said Bao-yu, 'what about a cup of that excellent tea of yours?'

'Excellent tea?' said Nightingale. 'There's nothing very special about the tea we drink here. If nothing but the best will do, you'd better wait for Aroma to come.'

'Never mind about *him!'* said Dai-yu. 'First go and get me some water!'

'He *is* our guest,' said Nightingale. 'I can't fetch you any water until I've given *him* his tea.' And she went to pour *him a* cup.

'Good girl!' said Bao-yu.

'If with your amorous mistress I should wed,
'Tis you, sweet maid, must make our bridal bed.'

The words, like Dai-yu's languorous line, were from *Western Chamber,* but in somewhat dubious taste. Dai-yu was dreadfully offended by them. In *an* instant the smile had vanished from her face.

'*What* was that you said?' He laughed:

'I didn't say anything.' Dai-yu began to cry.

'This is your latest amusement, I suppose. Every time you hear some coarse expression outside or read some crude, disgusting book, you have to come back here and give me the benefit of it. I am to become a source of entertainment for the *menfolk* now, it seems.'

She rose, weeping, from the bed and went outside. Bao-yu followed her in alarm.

'Dearest coz, it was very wrong of me to say that, but it just slipped out without thinking. Please don't go and tell! I promise never to say anything like that again. May my mouth rot and my tongue decay if I dot'

Just at that moment Aroma came hurrying up:
'Quick!' she said. 'You must come back and change. The Master wants to see you.'
The descent of this thunderbolt drove all else from his mind and he rushed off in a panic. As soon as he had changed, he hurried out of the Garden. Tealeaf was waiting for him outside the inner gate.
'I suppose you don't know what he wants to see me about?' Bao-yu asked him.
'I should hurry up, if I were you,' said Tealeaf. 'All I know is that he wants to see you. You'll find out why soon enough when you get there.'
He hustled him along as he spoke.
They had passed round the main hall, Bao-yu still in a state of fluttering apprehensiveness when there was a loud guffaw from a corner of the wall. It was Xue Pan, clapping his hands and stamping his feet in mirth.
'Ho! Ho! Ho! You'd never have come this quickly if you hadn't been told that Uncle wanted you!'
Tealeaf, also laughing, fell on his knees. Bao-yu stood there looking puzzled. It was some moments before it dawned on him that he had been hoaxed. Xue Pan was by this time being apologetic—bowing repeatedly and pumping his hands to show how sorry he was:
'Don't blame the lad!' he said. 'It wasn't his fault. I talked him into it.'
Bao-yu saw that he could do nothing, and might as well accept with a good grace.
'I don't mind being made a fool of;' he said, 'but I think it was going a bit far to bring my father into it. I think perhaps I'd better tell Aunt Xue and see what *she* thinks about it all.'
'Now look here, old chap,' said Xue Pan, getting agitated, 'it was only because I wanted to fetch you out a bit quicker. I admit it was very wrong of me to make free with your Parent, but after all, you've only got to mention *my* father next time you want to fool *me* and we'll be quits I'
'Aiyo I' said Bao-yu. 'Worse and worse!' He turned to Tealeaf: 'Treacherous little beast I What are you still kneeling for?'
Tealeaf kotowed and rose to his feet.
'Look,' said Xue Pan. 'I wouldn't have troubled you otherwise, only it's my birthday on the third of next month and old Hu and old Cheng and a couple of the others, I don't know where they got them from but they've given me:
a piece of fresh lotus root, ever so crisp and crunchy, as thick as that, look, and as long as that;
a huge great melon, look, as big as that;
a freshly-caught sturgeon as big as that;
and a cypress-smoked Siamese sucking-pig as big as that that came in the tribute from Siam.
Don't you think it was clever of them to get me those things? Maybe not so much the sturgeon and the sucking-pig. They're just expensive. But where would you go to get a piece of lotus root or a melon like that? However did they get them to gr*ow* so big? I've given some of the stuff to Mother, and while I was about it I sent some round to your grandmother and Auntie Wang, but I've still got a lot left over. I can't eat it all myself: it would be unlucky. But apart from me, the only person I can think of who is *worthy* to eat a present like this is you. That's why I came over specially to invite you. And we're lucky, because we've got a little chap who sings coming round as well. So you and I will be able to sit down and make a day of it' eh? Really enjoy ourselves.'
Xue Pan, still talking, conducted Bao-yu to his 'study', where Zhan Guang, Cheng Ri-xing, Hu Si-lai and Dan Ping-ren (the four donors of the feast) and the young singer he had mentioned were already waiting. They rose to welcome Bao-yu as he entered. When the bowings and courtesies were over and tea had been taken, Xue Pan called for his servants to lay. A tremendous bustle ensued, which seemed to go on for quite a long time before everything was finally ready and the diners were able to take their places at the table.

Bao-yu noticed sliced melon and lotus root among the dishes, both of unusual quality and size.
'It seems wrong to be sharing your presents with you before I have given you anything myself,' he said jokingly.
'Yes,' said Xue Pan. 'What are you planning to give me for my birthday next month? Something new and out of

the ordinary, I hope.'

'I haven't really got anything much to give you,' said Bao-yu. 'Things like money and food and clothing I don't want for, but they're not really mine to give. The only way I could give you something that would *really* be mine would be by doing some calligraphy or painting a picture for you.'

'Talking of pictures,' said Xue Pan genially, 'that's reminded me. I saw a set of dirty pictures in someone's house the other day. They were real beauties. There was a lot of writing on top that I didn't pay much attention to, but I did notice the signature. I think it was "Geng Huang", the man who painted them. They were really good!'

Bao-yu was puzzled. His knowledge of the masters of painting and calligraphy both past and present was not in-considerable, but he had never in all his experience come across a 'Geng Huang'. After racking his brains for some moments he suddenly began to chuckle and called for a writing-brush. A writing-brush having been produced by one of the servants, he wrote two characters with it in the palm of his hand.

'Are you quite *sure* the signature you saw was "Geng Huang"?' he asked Xue Pan.

'What do you mean?' said Xue Pan. 'Of course I'm sure.'

Bao-yu opened his hand and held it up for Xue Pan to see:

'You sure it wasn't these two characters? They *are* quite similar.'

The others crowded round to look. They all laughed when they saw what he had written:

'Yes, it must have been "Tang Yin". Mr Xue couldn't have been seeing straight that day. Ha! Ha! Ha!'

Xue Pan realized that he had made a fool of himself, but passed it off with an embarrassed laugh:

'Oh, Tankin' or wankin',' he said, 'what difference does it make, anyway?'

Just then 'Mr Feng' was announced by one of the servants, which Bao-yu knew could only mean General Feng Tang's son, Feng Zi-ying. Xue Pan and the rest told the boy to bring him in immediately, but Feng Zi-ying was already striding in, talking and laughing as he went. The others hurriedly rose and invited him to take a seat.

'Ha!' said Feng Zi-ying. 'No need to go out then. Enjoyin' yourselves at home, eh? Very nice too!'

'It's a long time since we've seen you around,' said Bao-yu. 'How's the General?'

'Fahver's in good health, thank you very much,' said Feng Zi-ying, 'but Muvver hasn't been too well lately. Caught a chill or somethin'.'

Observing with glee that Feng Zi-ying was sporting a black eye, Xue Pan asked him how he had come by it:

'Been having a dust-up, then? Who was it this time? Looks as if he left his signature!'

Feng Zi-ying laughed:

'Don't use the mitts any more nowadays—not since that time I laid into Colonel Chou's son and did him an injury. That was a lesson to me. I've learned to keep my temper since then. No, this happened the other day durin' a huntin' expedition in the Iron Net Mountains. I got fficked by a goshawk's wing.'

When was this?' Bao-yu asked him.

'We left on the twenty-eighth of last month,' said Feng Zi-ying. 'Didn't get back till a few days ago.'

'Ah, that explains why I didn't see you at Shen's party earlier this month,' said Bao-yu. 'I meant at the time to ask why you weren't there, but I forgot. Did you go alone on this expedition or was the General there with you?'

'Fahver most certainly *was* there,' said Feng Zi-ying. 'I was practically dragged along in tow. Do you think I'm mad enough to go rushin' off in pursuit of hideous hardships when I could be sittin' comfortably at home eatin' good food and drinkin' good wine and listenin' to the odd song or two? Still, some good came of it. It was a lucky accident.'

As he had now finished his tea, Xue Pan urged him to join them at table and tell them his story at leisure, but Feng Zi-ying rose to his feet again and declined.

'I ought by rights to stay and drink a few cups with you,' he said, 'but there's somethin' very important I've got to see Fahver about now, so I'm afraid I really must refuse.'

But Xue Pan, Bao-yu and the rest were by no means content to let him get away with this excuse and propelled him insistently towards the table.

‘Now look here, this is too bad!’ Feng Zi-ying good-humouredly protested. ‘All the years we’ve been knockin’ around togevver we’ve never before insisted that a fellow should have to stay if he don’t want to. The fact is, I really *can’t*. Oh well, if I *must* have a drink, fetch some decent-sized cups and I’ll just put down a couple of quick ones!’

This was dearly the most he would concede and the others perforce acquiesced. Two sconce-cups were brought and ceremoniously filled, Bao-yu holding the cups and Xue Pan pouring from the wine-kettle. Feng Zi-ying drank them standing, one after the other, each in a single breath.

‘Now come on,’ said Bao-yu, ‘let’s hear about this “lucky accident” before you go!’

Feng Zi-ying laughed:

‘Couldn’t tell it properly just now,’ he said. ‘It’s somethin’ that needs a special party all to itself. I’ll invite you all round to my place another day and you shall have the details then. There’s a favour I want to ask too, by the bye, so we’ll be able to talk about that then as well.’

He made a determined movement towards the door.

‘Now you’ve got us all peeing’ ourselves with curiosity!’ said Xue Pan. ‘You might at least tell us when this party is going to be, to put us out of our suspense.’

‘Not more than ten days’ time and not less than eight,’ said Feng Zi-ying; and going out into the courtyard, he jumped on his horse and clattered away.

Having seen him off, the others went in again, reseated themselves at table, and resumed their potations. When the party finally broke up, Bao-yu returned to the Garden in a state of cheerful inebriation. Moma, who had had no idea what the summons from Jia Zheng might portend and was still wondering anxiously what had become of him, at once demanded to know the cause of his condition. He gave her a full account of what had happened.

‘Well really!’ said Aroma. ‘Here were we practically beside ourselves with anxiety, and all the time you were there enjoying yourself! You might at least have sent word to let us know you were all tight.’

‘I was going to send word,’ said Bao-yu. ‘Of course I was. But then old Feng arrived and it put it out of my mind,’

At that moment Bao-chai walked in, all smiles.

‘I hear you’ve made a start on the famous present,’ she said.

‘But surely you and your family must have had some already ?’ said Bao-yu.

Bao-chai shook her head:

‘Pan was very pressing that I should have some, but I refused. I told him to save it for other people. I know I’m not really the right sort of person for such superior delicacies. If I were to eat any, I should be afraid of some frightful nemesis overtaking me.’

A maid poured tea for her as she spoke, and conversation of a desultory kind proceeded between sips.

*

Our narrative returns now to Dai-yu.

Having been present when Bao-yu received his summons, Dai-yu, too, was greatly worried about him - the more so as the day advanced and he had still not returned, Then in the evening, some time after dinner, she heard that he had just got back and resolved to go over and ask him exactly what had happened. She was sauntering along on the way there when she caught sight of Bao-chai some distance ahead of her, just entering Bao-yu’s courtyard. Continuing to amble on, she came presently to Drenched Blossoms Bridge, from which a large number of different kinds of fish were to be seen swimming about in the water below. Dai-yu did not know what kinds of fish they were, but they were so beautiful that she had to stop and admire them, and by the time she reached the House of **Green** Delights, the courtyard gate had been shut for the night and she was obliged to knock for admittance.

Now it so happened that Skybright had just been having a quarrel with Emerald, and being thoroughly out of temper, was venting some of her ill-humour on the lately arrived Bao-chai, complaining *sotto voce* behind her back about 'people who were always inventing excuses to come dropping in and who kept other people staying up half the night when they would like to be in bed'. A knock at the gate coming in the midst of these resentful mutterings was enough to make her really angry.

'They've all gone to bed,' she shouted, not even bothering to inquire who the caller was. 'Come again tomorrow I'

Dai-yu was aware that Bao-vu's maids often played tricks on one another, and it occurred to her that the girl in the courtyard, not recognizing her voice, might have mistaken her for another maid and be keeping her locked Out for a joke. She therefore called out again, this time somewhat louder than before:

'Come on! Open up, please! It's me.'

Unfortunately Skybright had still not recognized the voice.

'I don't care who you are,' she replied bad-temperedly. 'Master Bao's orders are that I'm not to let *anyone* in.

Dumbfounded by her insolence, Dai-yu stood outside the gate in silence. She could not, however much she felt like it' give vent to her anger in noisy expostulation. 'Although they are always telling me to treat my Uncle's house as my own,' she reflected, 'I am still really an outsider. And now that Mother and Father are both dead and I am on my own, to make a fuss about a thing like this when I am living in someone else's house could only lead to further unpleasantness.'

A big tear coursed, unregarded, down her cheek.

She was still standing there irresolute, unable to decide whether to go or stay, when a sudden volley of talk and laughter reached her from inside. It resolved itself, as she listened attentively, into the voices of Bao-yu and Bao-chai. An even bitterer sense of chagrin took possession of her. Suddenly, as she hunted in her mind for some possible reason for her exclusion, she remembered the events of the morning and concluded that Bao-yu must think she had told on him to his parents and was punishing her for her betrayal.

'But I would never betray you!' she expostulated with him in her mind. 'Why couldn't you have asked first, before letting your resentment carry you to such lengths? If you won't see me today, does that mean that from now on we are going to stop seeing each other altogether?'

The more she thought about it the more distressed she became.

> Chill was the **green** moss pearled with dew
> And chill was the wind in the avenue;

> but Dai-yu, all unmindful of the unwholesome damp, had withdrawn into the shadow of a flowering fruit-tree by the corner of the wall, and grieving now in real earnest, began to cry as though her heart would break. And as if Nature herself were affected by the grief of so beautiful a creature, the crows who had been roosting in the trees round about flew up with a great commotion and removed themselves to another part of the Garden, unable to endure the sorrow of her weeping.

> Teats filled each flower and grief their hearts perturbed,
> And silly birds were from their nests disturbed.

The author of the preceding couplet has given us a quatrain in much the same vein:

> Few in this world fair Frowner's looks surpassed,
> None matched her store of sweetness unexpressed.
> The first sob scarcely from her lips had passed
> When blossoms fell and birds flew off distressed.

As Dai-yu continued weeping there alone, the courtyard door suddenly opened with a loud creak and someone came out.

But in order to find out who it was, you will have to wait for the next volume.

EXPLICIT PRIMA PARS LAIDIS HISTORIAE

CHAPTER 27

Beauty Perspiring sports with butterflies
by the Raindrop Pavilion
And Beauty Suspiring weeps for fallen blossoms
by the Flowers' Crave

TO CONTINUE OUR STORY,

As Dai-yu stood there weeping, there was a sudden creak of the courtyard gate and Bao-chai walked out, accompanied by Bao-yu with Aroma and ah bevy of other maids who had come out to see her off. Dai-yu was on the point of stepping forward to question Bao-yu, but shrank from embarrassing him in front of so many people. instead she slipped back into the shadows to let Bao-chai pass, emerging only when Bao-yu and the rest were back inside and the gate was once more barred. She stood for a while facing it, and shed a few silent tears; then, realizing that it was pointiess to remain standing there, she turned and went back to her room and began, in a listless, mechanical manner, to take off her ornaments and prepare herself for the night.

Nightingale and Snowgoose had long since become habituated to Dai-yu's moody temperament; they were used to her unaccountable fits of depression, when she would sit, the picture of misery, in gloomy silence broken only by an occasional gusty sigh, and to her mysterious, perpetual weeping, that was occasioned by no observable cause. At first they had tried to reason with her, or, imagining that she must be grieving for her parents or that she was feeling homesick or had been upset by some unkindness, they would do their best to comfort her. But as the months lengthened into years and she still continued exactly the same as before, they gradually became accustomed and no longer sought reasons for her behaviour. That was why they ignored her on this occasion and left her alone to her misery, remaining where they were in the outer room and continuing to occupy themselves with their own affairs.

She sat, motionless as a statue, leaning against the back of the bed, her hands clasped about her knees, her eyes full of tears. It had already been dark for some hours when she finally lay down to sleep.

Our story passes over the rest of that night in silence.

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Next day was the twenty-sixth of the fourth month, the day on which, this year, the festival of Grain in Ear was due to fall. To be precise, the festival's official commencement was on the twenty-sixth day of the fourth month at two o'clock in the afternoon. It has been the custom from time immemorial to make offerings to the flower

fairies on this day. For Grain in Ear marks the beginning of summer; it is about this time that the blossom begins to fail; and tradition has it that the flower-spirits, their work now completed, go away on this day and do not return until the following year. The offerings are therefore thought of as a sort of farewell party for the flowers.

This charming custom of 'speeding the fairies' is a special favourite with the fair sex, and in Prospect Garden all the girls were up betimes on this day making little coaches and palanquins out of willow-twigs and flowers and little banners and pennants from scraps of brocade and any other pretty material they could find, which they fastened with threads of coloured silk to the tops of flowering trees and shrubs. Soon every plant and tree was decorated and the whole garden had become a shimmering sea of nodding blossoms and fluttering coloured streamers. Moving about in the midst of it all, the girls in their brilliant summer dresses, beside which the most vivid hues of plant and plumage became faint with envy, added the final touch of brightness to a scene of indescribable gaiety and colour.

All the young people—Bao-chai, Ying-chun, Tan-chun, Xichun, Li Wan, Xi-feng and her little girl and Caltrop, and all the maids from all the different apartments—were outside in the Garden enjoying themselves—all, that is, except Dai-yi, whose absence, beginning to be noticed, was first commented on by Ying-chun:

'What's happened to Cousin Lin? Lazy girl! Surely she can't *still* be in bed at this hour?'

Bao-chai volunteered to go and fetch her:

'The rest of you wait here; I'll go and rout her out for you,' she said; and breaking away from the others, she made off in the direction of the Naiad's House.

While she was on her way, she caught sight of Élégante and the eleven other little actresses, evidently on their way to join in the fun. They came up and greeted her, and for a while she stood and chatted with them. As she was leaving them, she turned back and pointed in the direction from which she had lust come:

'You'll find the others somewhere over there,' she said. I'm on my way to get Miss Lin. I'll join the rest of you presently.'

She continued, by the circuitous route that the garden's contours obliged her to take, on her way to the Naiad's House. Raising her eyes as she approached it, she suddenly became aware that the figure ahead of her just disappearing inside it was Bao-yu. She stopped and lowered her eyes pensively again to the ground.

'Bao-yu and Dai-yu have known each other since they were little,' she reflected. 'They are used to behaving uninhibitedly when they are alone together. They don't seem to care what they say to one another; and one is never quite sure what sort of mood one is going to find them in. And Dai-yu, at the best of times, is always so touchy and suspicious. If I go in now after him, *he* is sure to feel embarrassed and *she* is sure to start imagining things. It would be better to go back without seeing her.'

Her mind made up, she turned round and began to retrace her steps, intending to go back to the other girls; but just at that moment she noticed two enormous turquoise-coloured butterflies a little way ahead of her, each as large as a child's fan, fluttering and dancing on the breeze. She watched them fascinated and thought she would like to play a game with them. Taking a fan from inside her sleeve and holding it outspread of her, she followed them off the path and into the grass.

To and fro fluttered the pair of butterflies, sometimes alighting for a moment, but always flying off again before she could reach them. Once they seemed on the point of flying across the little river that flowed through the midst of the garden and Bao-chai had to stalk them with bated breath for fear of startling them out on to the water. By the time she had reached the Raindrop Pavilion she was perspiring freely and her interest in the butterflies was beginning to evaporate. She was about to turn back when she became aware of a low murmur of

voices coming from inside the pavilion.

Raindrop Pavilion was built in such a way that it projected into the middle of the pool into which the little watercourse widened out at this point, so that on three of its sides it looked out on to the water. It was surrounded by a verandah, whose railing followed the many angles formed by the bays and projections of the base. In each of its wooden walls there was a large paper-covered casement of elegantly patterned lattice-work.

Hearing voices inside the pavilion, Bao-chai halted and inclined her ear to listen.

'Are you s*ure* this is your handkerchief?' one of the voices was saying. 'If it is, take it; but if it isn't, I must return it to Mr Yun.'

'Of course it's mine,' said the second voice. 'Come on, let me have it!'

'Are you going to give me a reward? I hope I haven't taken all this trouble for nothing.'

'I promised you I would give you a reward, and so I shall. Surely you don't think I was deceiving you?'

'All right, I get a reward for bringing it to you. But what about the person who picked it up? Doesn't *he* get anything?'

'Don't talk nonsense,' said the second voice. 'He's one of the masters. A master picking up something belonging to one of us should give it back as a matter of course How can there be any question of *rewarding him?'*

'If you don't intend to reward him, what am I supposed to tell him when I see him? He was most insistent that I wasn't to give you the handkerchief unless you gave him a reward.' There was a long pause, after which the second voice replied:

'Oh' all right. Let him have this other handkerchief of mine then. That will have to do as his reward - But you must swear a solemn oath not to tell anyone else about this.'

'May my mouth rot and may I die a horrible death if I ever tell anyone else about this, amen!' said the first voice.

'Goodness!' said the second voice again. 'Here we are talking away, and all the time someone could be creeping up outside and listening to every word we say. We had better open these casements; then even if anyone outside sees us, they'll think we are having an ordinary conversation; and *we* shall be able to see *them* and know in time when to stop.'

Bao-chai, listening outside, gave a start.

'No wonder they say "venery and thievery sharpen the wits",' she thought. 'If they open those windows and see me here, they are going to feel terribly embarrassed. And one of those voices sounds like that proud, peculiar girl **Crimson** who works in Bao-yu's room. If a girl like that knows that I have overheard her doing something she shouldn't be doing, it will be a case of "the desperate dog will jump a wall, the desperate man will hazard all": there'll be a great deal of trouble and *I* shall be involved in it. There isn't time to hide. I shall have to do as the cicada does when he jumps out of his skin: give them something to put them off the scent—'

There was a loud creak as the casement yielded. Bao-chai advanced with deliberately noisy tread.

'Frowner!' she called out gaily. *'I* know where you're hiding.'

Inside the pavilion **Crimson** and Trinket, who heard her say this and saw her advancing towards them just as they were opening the casement, were speechless with amazement; but Bao-chai ignored their confusion and addressed them genially:

'Have you two got Miss Un hidden away in there?'

'I haven't *seen* Miss Lin,' said Trinket.

'I saw her just now from the river-bank,' said Bao-chai. 'She was squatting down over here playing with

something in the water. I was going to creep up and surprise her, but she spotted me before I could get up to her and disappeared round this corner. Are you *sure* she's not hiding in there?'

She made a point of going inside the pavilion and searching; then, coming out again, she said in a voice loud enough for them to hear:

'If she's not in the pavilion, she must have crept into that grotto. Oh well, if she's not afraid of being bitten by a snake—!'

As she walked away she laughed inwardly at the ease with which she had extricated herself from a difficult situation.

'I think I'm fairly safely Out of that one,' she thought. 'I wonder what those two will make of it.'

What indeed! **Crimson** believed every word that Bao-chai had said, and as soon as the latter was at a distance,. she seized hold of Trinket in alarm:

'Oh' how terrible! If Miss Lin was squatting there, she must have heard what we said before she went away.'

Her companion was silent.

'Oh dear! What do you think she'll do?' said Crimson.

'Well, suppose she did hear,' said Trinket, 'it's not *her* back-ache. If we mind our business and she minds hers, there's no reason why anything should come of it.'

'If it were Miss Bao that had heard us, I don't suppose anything *would,'* said Crimson; 'but Miss Lin is so critical and so intolerant. If *she* heard it and it gets about—oh dear!'

But just at that moment Caltrop, Advent, Chess and Scribe were seen approaching the pavilion, and **Crimson** and Trinket had to drop the subject in a hurry and join in a general conversation. **Crimson** noticed Xi-feng standing half-way up the rockery above the little grotto, beckoning. Breaking away from the others, she bounded up to her with a smiling ~ce:

'What can I do for you, madam?'

Xi-feng ran an appraising eye over her. A neat, pretty, pleasantly-spoken girl, she decided, and smiled at her graciously:

'I have come here without my maids and need someone to a message back to my apartment. I wonder if you are clever enough to get it right.'

'Tell me the message, madam. If I don't get it right and make a mess of it, it will be up to you to punish me.'

'Which of the young ladies do you work for?' said Xi-feng. 'I'd better know, so that I can explain to her if she asks for you while you are doing my errand.'

'I work for Master Bao,' said Crimson.

Xi-feng laughed.

'Ah ha! You work for Master Bao.. No wonder. Very well, then, if he asks for you while you are away, I shall explain. I want you to go to my apartment and tell Patience that there is a roll of money under the stand of the Ru-ware dish on the table in the outside room. There are a hundred and twenty taels of silver in it to pay the embroiderers with. Tell her that when Zhang Cai's wife comes for it, she is to weigh it out in front of her before handing it over. And there's one other thing. There's a little purse at the head of the bed in my inside room. I want you to bring it to me.

'Yes madam,' said Crimson, and hurried off.

Returning shortly afterwards, she found that Xi-feng was no longer on the rockery; but Chess had just

emerged from the little grotto beneath it and was standing there doing up her sash. **Crimson** ran down to speak to her:

'Excuse me, did you see where Mrs Lian went to?'

''Fraid I didn't notice,' said Chess.

Crimson looked around her. Bao-chai and Tan-chun were standing at the edge of the pool looking at the fish. She went up to them:

'Excuse me, does either of you young ladies happen to know where Mrs Lian went to just now, please?'

Try Mrs Zhu's place,' said Tan-chun.

Crimson hurried off in the direction of Sweet-rice Village. On her way she ran head-on into a party of maids consisting of Skybright, Mackerel, Emerald, Ripple, Musk, Scribe, Picture and Oriole.

'Here, what are you gadding about like this for?' said Skybright as soon as she saw who it was. 'The flowers want watering; the birds need feeding; the stove for the tea-water needs seeing to. You've no business to go wandering around outside!'

'Master Bao gave orders yesterday that the flowers were only to be watered every other day,' said Crimson. 'I fed the birds when you were still fast asleep in bed.'

'What about the stove?' said Emerald.

'It isn't my day for the stove,' said Crimson. 'The tea-water today has nothing to do with me.'

'Listen to Miss Pert!' said Mackerel. 'I wouldn't bother about her, if I were you—just leave her to wander about as she pleases.'

'I'm *no:* "wandering about", if you really want to know,' said Crimson. 'If you really want to know, Mrs Lian sent me outside to take a message and to fetch something for her.'

She held up the purse for them to see; at which they were silent But when they had passed each other, Skybright laughed sneeringly:

'You can see why she's so uppity. She's on the climb again. Look at her—all cock-a-hoop because someone's given her a little message to carry! And she probably doesn't even know who it's about. Well, one little message isn't going to get her very far. It's what happens in the long run that counts. Now if she were clever enough to climb her way right out of this Garden and stay there, that would be really something!'

These words were spoken for **Crimson** to hear, but in such a way that she was unable to answer them. She had to swallow her anger and hurry on to look for Xi-feng.

Xi-feng was in Li Wan's room, as Tan-chun had predicted, and **Crimson** found the two of them in conversation. She went up to Xi-feng and delivered her message:

'Patience says that she found the silver just after you had gone and took care of it; and she says that when Zhang Cai's wife came for it she did weigh it out in front of her before giving it to her to take away.'

Crimson now produced the purse and handed it to Xi-feng.

Then she added:

'Patience told me to tell you that Brightie has just been in to inquire what your instructions were for his visit, and she said that she gave him a message to take based on the things she thought you would want him to say.'

'Oh?' said Xi-feng, amused. 'And what *was* this message "based on the things she thought I would want him to say"?'

'She said he was to tell them: "Our lady hopes your lady is well and she says that the Master is away at present and may not be back for another day or two, but your lady is not to worry; and when the lady from West Lane is better, our lady will come with their lady to see your lady. And our lady says that the lady from West

Lane sent someone the other day with a message from the *elder* Lady Wang saying that she hopes our lady is well and will she please see if *our* Lady Wang can let her have a few of her Golden Myriad Macrobiotic Pills; and if she can, will our lady please send someone with them to *her*, because someone will be going from there to the el*der* Lady Wang's in a few days' time and they will be able to take them for her—**Crimson** was still in full spate when Li Wan interrupted her
with a laugh:

'What an extraordinary number of "ladies"! I hope you can understand what it's all about, Feng. I'm sure *I* can't !'

'I'm not surprised,' said Xi-feng. 'There are four or five different households involved in that message.' She smiled graciously at Crimson. 'You're a clever girl, my dear, to have got it all right—not like the simpering little ninnies I usually have to put up with. You have no idea, cousin,' she said, turning to Li Wan again. 'Apart from the one or two girls and one or two older women that I always keep about me, I just dread talking to servants nowadays. They take such an *interminable* time to tell you anything—*so* long-winded! And the airs and graces they give themselves! and the simpering! and the urn-mg and ah-mg! If they only knew how it makes me *fume!* Our Patience used to be like that when she first came to me. I used to say to her, "Do you think it makes you seem glamorous, all that affected humming?—like a little gnat!" I had to talk to her several times about it before she would mend her ways.'

Li Wan laughed

'I suppose if they were all peppercorns like you, it would be all right.'

'This girl's all right,' said Xi-feng. 'Those two messages she gave me just now may not have been very long ones, but you could see how clear-cut her delivery of them was.'

She smiled at **Crimson** again.

'How would you like to come and work for me and be my god-daughter? With a little grooming from me you could go far.'

Crimson suppressed a giggle.

'Why do you laugh?' said Xi-feng. 'I suppose you think I'm too young to be your god-mother. You're very silly if you think that. You just ask around a bit: there are plenty much older than you who'd give their eats to be my god-daughter. What I'm offering you is a very special favour.'

Crimson smiled.

'I wasn't laughing because of that, madam. I was laughing because you had got the generation wrong. My mother is your god-daughter already. If you made me your god-daughter too, I should be my own mother's sister I'

'Who *is* your mother?' said Xi-feng.

'Do you mean to say that you don't know who this girl is that you've been talking to all this time?' said Li Wan. 'This is Lin Zhi-xiao's daughter.'

Xi-feng registered surprise:

'You mean to tell me that this is the *Lins'* daughter?' She laughed. '*That* couple of old sticks? I can never get a peep out of either of them. I've always maintained that Lin Zhi-xiao and his wife were the perfect match: one *hears* nothing and the other *says* nothing. Well! To think they should have produced a bright little thing like this between them!—How old are you?' she asked Crimson.

'Sixteen.'

'And what's your name?'

‘“Crimson”, madam. I used to be called “Jade”, but they made me change it on account of Master Bao.’

Xi-feng looked away with a frown of displeasure.

‘I should think so too,’ she muttered. ‘Odious people! One can hear them saying it: “We’ve got a ‘Jade’ in our family the same as you”, or some such impertinence.’

She turned to Li Wan again:

‘I don’t think you know, Wan, but I told this girl’s mother that as Lai Da’s wife is so busy nowadays that she doesn’t even know who half the girls in the household *are* any longer, I wanted *her* to pick out a couple of likely-looking girls to work under me. Now she promised that she would do this; but you see, not only has she not done so, but she’s actually gone and sent her own daughter to work for someone else. Do you suppose she *really* thinks her girl would have had such a terrible time with me?’

‘Don’t be so touchy,’ said Li Wan. ‘Her mother is not to blame. The girl had already started service in the Garden before you ever spoke to her about it.’

‘Oh well, in that case,’ said Xi-feng, recovering her good humour, ‘I’ll have a word with Bao-yu about it tomorrow. I’ll tell him to find someone else and let me have this girl to work under *me*. Still—’ she turned to Crimson, ‘perhaps we ought to ask the party most concerned if she is willing.’

Crimson smiled.

‘As to being willing or not, madam, I don’t think it’s my place to say. But I do know this: that if I was to work for you, I should get to know what’s what and all the inside and outside of household management. I’m sure it would be wonderful experience.’

Just then a maid arrived from Lady Wang’s asking for Xi-feng, who promptly excused herself to Li Wan and left. **Crimson** returned to **Green** Delights—where our story now leaves her.

*****

We now return to Dai-yu, who, having slept so little the night before, was very late getting up on the morning of the festival. Hearing that the other girls were all out in the garden ‘speeding the fairies’ and fearing to be teased by them for her lazy habits, she hurried over her toilet and went out as soon as it was completed. A smiling Bao-yu appeared in the gate-way as she was stepping down into the courtyard.

‘Well, coz,’ he said, ‘I hope you *didn’t* tell on me yesterday. You had me worrying about it all last night.’

Dai-yu turned back, ignoring him, to address Nightingale inside:

‘When you do the room, leave one of the casements open so that the parent swallows can get in. And put the lion doorstop on the bottom of the blind to stop it flapping. And don’t forget to put the cover back on the burner after you’ve lighted the incense.’

She made her way across the courtyard, still ignoring him. Bao-yu, who knew nothing of the little drama that had taken place outside his gate the night before, assumed that she was still angry about his unfortunate lapse earlier on that same day, when he had offended her susceptibilities with a somewhat risqué quotation from *The Western Chamber*. He offered her now, with energetic bowing and hand-pumping, the apologies that the previous day’s emergency had caused him to neglect. But Dai-yu walked straight past him and out of the gate, not deigning so much as a glance in his direction, and stalked off in search of the others.

Bao-yu was nonplussed. He began to suspect that something more than he had first imagined must be wrong.

‘Surely it can’t only be because of yesterday lunchtime that she’s carrying on in this fashion? There must be

something else. On the other hand, I didn't get back until late and I didn't see her again last night, so how *could* I have offended her?'

Preoccupied with these reflections, he followed her at some distance behind.

Not far ahead Bao-chai and Tan-chun were watching the ungainly courtship dance of some stork~. When they saw Dai-yu coming, they invited her to join them, and the three girls stood together and chatted. Then Bao-yu arrived. Tan-chun greeted him with sisterly concern:

'How have you been keeping, Bao? It's three whole days since I saw you last.'

Bao-yu smiled back at her.

'How have *you* been keeping, sir? I was asking Cousin Wan about you the day before yesterday.'

'Come over here a minute,' said Tan-chun. 'I want to talk to you.'

He followed her into the shade of a pomegranate tree a little way apart from the other two.

'Has Father asked to see you at all during this last day. or two?' Tan-chun began.

'No.'

'I thought I heard someone say yesterday that he had been asking for you.'

'No,' said Bao-yu, smiling at her concern. 'Whoever it was was mistaken. He certainly hasn't asked for *me*.'

Tan-chun smiled and changed the subject.

'During the past few months,' she said, 'I've managed to save up another ten strings or so of cash. I'd like you to take it again like you did last time, and next time you go out, if you see a nice painting or calligraphic scroll or some amusing little thing that would do for my room, I'd like you to buy it for me.'

'Well, I don't know,' said Bao-yu. 'In the trips I make to bazaars and temple fairs, whether it's inside the city or round about, I can't say that I ever see anything *really* nice or out of the ordinary. It's all bronzes and jades and porcelain and that sort of stuff. Apart from that it's mostly dress-making materials and clothes and things to eat.'

'Now what would I want things like that for?' said Tan-chun. 'No, I mean something like that little wickerwork basket you bought me last time, or the little box carved out of bamboo root, or the little clay burner. I thought they were sweet. Unfortunately the others took such a fancy to them that they carried them off as loot and wouldn't give them back to me again.'

'Oh, if *those* are the sort of things you want,' said Bao-yu laughing, 'it's very simple. Just give a few strings of cash to one of the boys and he'll bring you back a whole cartload of them.'

'What do the boys know about it?' said Tan-chun. 'I need someone who can pick out the interesting things and the ones that are in good taste. You get me lots of nice little things, and I'll embroider a pair of slippers for you like the ones I made for you last time—only this time I'll do them mote carefully.'

'Talking of those slippers reminds me,' said Bao-yu. 'I happened to run into Father once when I was wearing them. He was Most Displeased. When he asked me who made them, I naturally didn't date to tell him that you had, so I said that Aunt Wang had given them to me as a birthday present a few days before. There wasn't much he could do about it when he heard that they came from Aunt Wang; so after a very long pause he just said, "What a pointless waste of human effort and valuable material, to. produce things like that!" I told this to Aroma when I got back, and she said, "Oh, that's nothing! You should have heard your Aunt Zhao complaining about those slippers. She was *furious* when she heard about them:

'Her own natural brother so down at heel he scarcely dares show his face to people, and she spends her time making things like that!'"'

Tan-chun's smile had vanished:

'How *can* she talk such nonsense? Why should *I* be the one to make shoes for him? Huan gets a clothing allowance, doesn't he? He gets his clothing and footwear provided for the same as all the test of us. And fancy saying a thing like that in front of a roomful of servants! For whose benefit was this remark made, I wonder? I make an occasional pair of slippers just for something to do in my spare time; and if I give a pair to someone I particularly like, that's my own affair. Surely no one else has any business to start telling me who I should give them to? Oh, she's so petty!'

Bao-yu shook his head:

'Perhaps you're being a bit hard on her. She's probably got her reasons.'

This made Tan-chun really angry. Her chin went up defiantly:

'Now you're being as stupid as her. of *course* she's got her reasons; but they are ignorant, stupid reasons. But she can think what she likes: as far as *I* am concerned, Sir Jia is my father and Lady Wang is my mother, and who was born in whose room doesn't interest me—the way I choose my friends inside the family has nothing to do with that. Oh, I know I shouldn't talk about her like this; but she is *so* idiotic about these things. As a matter of fact I can give you an even better example than your story of the slippers. That last time I gave you my savings to get something for me, she saw me a few days afterwards and started telling me how short of money she was and how difficult things were for her. I took no notice, of course. But later, when the maids were Out of the room, she began attacking me for giving the money I'd saved to other people instead of giving it to Huan. Really! I didn't know whether to laugh or get angry with her. In the end I just walked out of the room and went round to see Mother.'

There was an amused interruption at this point from Bao-chai, who was still standing where they had left her a few minutes before:

'Do finish your talking and come back soon It's easy to see that you two are brother and sister. As soon as you see each other, you get into a huddle and start talking about family secrets. Would it *really* be such a disaster if anything you are saying were to be overheard?'

Tan-chun and Bao-yu rejoined her, laughing.

Not seeing Dai-yu, Bao-yu realized that she must have slipped off elsewhere while be was talking.

'Better leave it a day or two,' he told himself on reflection. 'Wait until her anger has calmed down a bit.'

While he was looking downwards and meditating, he noticed that the ground where they were standing was carpeted with a bright profusion of wind-blown flowers—pomegranate and balsam for the most part.

'You can see she's upset,' he thought ruefully. 'She's neglecting her flowers. I'll bury this lot for her and remind her about it next time I see her.'

He became aware that Bao-chai was arranging for him and Tan-chun to go with her outside.

'I'll join you two presently,' he said, and waited until they were a little way off before stooping down to gather the fallen blossoms into the skirt of his gown. It was quite a way from where he was to the place where Dai-yu had buried the peach-blossom on that previous occasion, but he made his way towards it, over rocks and bridges and through plantations. of trees and flowers. When he had almost reached his destination and there was only the spur of a miniature 'mountain' between him and the burial-place of the flowers, he heard the sound of a voice, coming from the other side of the rock, whose continuous, gentle chiding was occasionally broken by the most pitiable and heart-rending sobs.

'It must be a maid from one of the apartments,' thought Bao-yu. 'Someone has been ill-treating her, and she has run here to cry on her own.'

He stood still and endeavoured to catch what the weeping girl was saying. She appeared to be reciting something:

The blossoms fade and falling fill the air,
Of fragrance and bright hues bereft and bare.
Floss drifts and flutters round the Maiden's bower,
Or softly strikes against her curtained door.

The Maid, grieved by these signs of spring's decease,
Seeking some means her sorrow to express,
Has rake in hand into the garden gone,.
Before the fallen flowers are trampled on.

Elm-pods and willow-floss are fragrant too;
Why care, Maid, where the fallen flowers blew?
Next year, when peach and plum-tree bloom again,
Which of your sweet companions will remain?

This spring the heartless swallow built his nest
Beneath the eaves of mud with flowers compressed.
Next year the flowers will blossom as before,
But swallow, nest, and Maid will be no more.

Three hundred and three-score the year's full tale:
From swords of frost and from the slaughtering gale
How can the lovely flowers long stay intact,
Or, once loosed, from their drifting fate draw back?

Blooming so steadfast, fallen so hard to find!
Beside the flowers' grave, with sorrowing mind,
The solitary Maid sheds many a tear,
Which on the boughs as bloody drops appear.

At twilight, when the cuckoo sings no more,
The Maiden with her rake goes in at door
And lays her down between the lamplit walls,
While a chill rain against the window falls.

I know not why my heart's so strangely sad,
Half grieving for the spring and yet half glad:
Glad that it came, grieved it so soon was spent.
So soft it came, so silently it went!

Last night, outside, a mournful sound was heard:
The spirits of the flowers and of the bird.
But neither bird nor flowers would long delay,
Bird lacking speech, and flowers too shy to stay.

And then I wished that I had wings to fly
After the drifting flowers across the sky:
Across the sky to the world's farthest end,
The flowers' last fragrant resting-place to find.

But better their remains in silk to lay
And bury underneath the wholesome clay,
Pure substances the pure earth to enrich,
Than leave to soak and stink in some foul ditch.

Can I, that these flowers' obsequies attend,
Divine how soon or late *my* life will end?
Let others laugh flower-burial to see:
Another year who will be burying me?

As petals drop and spring begins to fail,
The bloom of youth, too, sickens and turns pale.
One day, when spring has gone and youth has fled.
The Maiden and the flowers will both be dead.

All this was uttered in a voice half-choked with sobs; for the words recited seemed only to inflame the grief of the reciter—indeed, Bao-yu, listening on the other side of the rock, was so overcome by them that he had already flung him-self weeping upon the ground.

But the sequel to this painful scene will be told in the following chapter.

CHAPTER 28

*A **crimson** cummerbund becomes a pledge of friendship*
And a chaplet of medicine-beads becomes a source of embarrassment

ON the night before the festival, it may be remembered, Lin Dai-yu had mistakenly supposed Bao-yu responsible for Sky-bright's refusal to open the gate for her. The ceremonial farewell to the flowers of the following morning had transformed her pent-up and still smouldering resentment into a more generalized and seasonable sorrow.

This had finally found its expression in a violent outburst of grief as she was burying the latest collection of fallen blossoms in her flower-grave. Meditation on the fate of flowers had led her to a contemplation of her own sad and orphaned lot; she had burst into tears, and soon. after had begun a recitation of the poem whose words we recorded in the preceding chapter.

Unknown to her, Bao-yu was listening to this recitation from the slope of the near-by rockery. At first he merely nodded and sighed sympathetically; but when he heard the words

> 'Can J, that these flowers' obsequies attend,
> Divine how soon or late *my* life will end?'

and, a little later,

> 'One day when spring has gone and youth has fled,
> The Maiden and the flowers will both be dead.'

he flung himself on the ground in a fit of weeping, scattering the earth all about him with the flowers he had been carrying in the skirt of his gown.

Lin Dai-yu dead! A world from which that delicate, flowerlike countenance had irrevocably departed! It was unutterable anguish to think of it. Yet his sensitized imagination *did* now consider it—went on, indeed, to consider a world from which the others, too—Bao-chai, Caltrop, Aroma and the rest—had also irrevocably departed. Where would *he* be then? What would have become of him? And what of the Garden, the rocks, the flowers, the trees? To whom would they belong when he and the girls were no longer there to enjoy them? Passing from loss to loss in his imagination, he plunged deeper and deeper into a grief that seemed inconsolable. As the poet says:

> Flowers in my eyes and bird-song in my ears
> Augment my loss and mock my bitter tears.

Dai-yu, then, as she stood plunged in her own private sorrowing, suddenly heard the sound of another person crying bitterly on the rocks above her.

'The others are always telling me I'm a "case",' she thought. Surely there can't be another "case" up there?'

But on looking up she saw that it was Bao-yu.

'Pshaw!' she said crossly to herself. 'I thought it was another girl, but all the time it was that cruel, hate—'

'Hateful' she had been going to say, but clapped her mouth shut before uttering it. She sighed instead and began to walk away.

By the time Bao-yu's weeping was over, Dai-yu was no longer there. He realized that she must have seen him and have gone away in order to avoid him. Feeling suddenly rather foolish, he rose to his feet and brushed the earth from his clothes. Then he descended from the rockery and began to retrace his steps in the direction of **Green** Delights. Quite by coincidence Dai-yu was walking along the same path a little way ahead.

'Stop a minute!' he cried, hurrying forward to catch up with her. 'I know you are not taking any notice of me, but I only want to ask you one simple question, and then you need never have anything more to do with me.'

Dai-yu had turned back to see who it was. When she saw that it was Bao-yu still, she was going to ignore him again; but hearing him say that he only wanted to ask her one question, she told him that he might do so.

Bao-yu could not resist teasing her a little.

'How about *two* questions? Would you wait for two?'

Dai-yu set her face forwards and began walking on again.

Bao-yu sighed.

'If it has to be like this now,' he said, as if to himself; 'it's a pity it was ever like it was in the beginning.'

Dai-yu's curiosity got the better of her. She stopped walking and turned once more towards him.

'Like *what* in the beginning?' she asked. 'And like what now?'

'Oh, the *beginning!'* said Bao-yu. 'In the *beginning,* when you first came here, I was your faithful companion in all your games. Anything I had, even the thing most dear to me, was yours for the asking. If there was something to eat that I specially liked, I had only to hear that you were fond of it too and I would religiously hoard it away to share with you when you got back, not daring even to touch it until you came. We ate at the same table. We slept in the same bed. I used to think that because we were so close then, there would be something special about our relationship when we grew up—that even if we weren't particularly affectionate, we should at least have more understanding and forbearance for each other than the rest. But how wrong I was! Now that you *have* grown up, you seem only to have grown more touchy. You don't seem to care about *me* any more at all. You spend all your time brooding about outsiders like Peng and Chai. I haven't got any *real* brothers and sisters left here now. There are Huan and Tan, of course; but as you know, they're only my half-brother and half-sister: they aren't my mother's children. I'm on my own, like you. I should have thought we had so much in common -But what's the use? I try and try, but it gets me nowhere; and nobody knows or cares.'

At this point—in spite of himself—he burst into tears.

The palpable evidence of her own eyes and ears had by now wrought a considerable softening on Dai-yu's heart. A sympathetic tear stole down her own cheek, and she hung her head and said nothing. Bao-yu could see that he had moved her.

'I know I'm not much use nowadays,' he continued, 'but however bad you may think me, I would never wittingly do anything in your presence to offend you. If I *do* ever slip up in some way, you ought to tell me off about it and warn me not to do it again, or shout at me—hit me, even, if you feel like it; I shouldn't mind. But you don't do that. You just ignore me. You leave me utterly at a loss to know what I'm supposed to have done wrong, so that I'm driven half frantic wondering what I ought to do to make up for it. If I were to die now, I should die with a grievance, and all the masses and exorcisms in the world wouldn't lay my ghost. Only when you explained what your reason was for ignoring me should I cease from haunting you and be reborn into another life.'

Dai-yu's resentment for the gate incident had by now completely evaporated. She merely said:

'Oh well, in that case why did you tell your maids not to let me in when I came to call on you?'

'I honestly don't know what you are referring to,' said Bao-yu in surprise. 'Strike me dead if I ever did any such thing!'

'Hush!' said Dai-yu. 'Talking about death at this time of the morning! You should be more careful what you say. If you did, you did. If you didn't, you didn't. There's no need for these horrible oaths.'

'I really and truly didn't know you had called,' said Bao-yu. Cousin Bao came and sat with me a few minutes last night and then went away again. That's the only call I know about.'

Dai-yu reflected for a moment or two, then smiled.

'Yes, it must have been the maids being lazy. Certainly they can be very disagreeable at such times.'

'Yes, I'm sure that's what it was,' said Bao-yu. 'When I get back, I'll find out who it was and give her a

good talking-to.'

'I think some of your young ladies could *do* with a good talking-to,' said Dai-yu, '—though it's not really for me to say so. It's a good job it was only me they were rude to. If Miss Bao or Miss Cow were to call and they behaved like that to *her*, that would be really serious.'

She giggled mischievously. Bao-yu didn't know whether to laugh with her or grind his teeth. But just at that moment a maid came up to ask them both to lunch and the two of them went together out of the Garden and through into the front part of the mansion, calling in at Lady Wang's on the way.

'How did you get on with that medicine of Dr Bao's,' Lady Wang asked Dai-yu as soon as she saw her, '—the Court Physician? Do you think you are any better for it?'

'It didn't seem to make very much difference,' said Dai-yu. 'Grandmother has put me back on Dr Wang's prescription.'

'Cousin Lin has got a naturally weak constitution, Mother,' said Bao-yu. 'She takes cold very easily. These strong decoctions are all very well provided she only takes one or two to dispel the cold. For regular treatment it's probably best if she sticks to pills.'

'The doctor was telling me about some pills for her the other day,' said Lady Wang, 'but I just can't remember the name.'

'I know the names of most of those pills,' said Bao-yu. 'I expect he wanted her to take Ginseng Tonic Pills.'

'No, that wasn't it,' said Lady Wang.

'Eight Gem Motherwort Pills?' said Bao-yu. 'Zhang's Dextrals?. Zhang's Sinistrals? If it wasn't any of them, it was probably Dr Cui's Adenophora Kidney Pills.'

'No,' said Lady Wang, 'it was none of those. All I can remember is that there was a "Vajra" in it.

Bao-yu gave a hoot and clapped his hands:

'I've never heard of "Vajra Pills". If there are "Vajra Pills", I suppose there must be "Buddha Boluses "!'

The others all laughed. Bao-chai looked at him mockingly. 'I should think it was probably "The Deva-king Cardiac Elixir Pills",' she said.

'Yes, yes, that's it!' said Lady Wang. 'Of course! How stupid of me!'

'No, Mother, not stupid,' said Bao-yu. 'It's the strain. All those Vajra-kings and Bodhisattvas have been overworking you!'

'You're a naughty boy to make fun of your poor mother,' said Lady Wang. 'A good whipping from your Pa is what you need.'

'Oh, Father doesn't whip me for that sort of thing nowadays,' said Bao-yu.

Now that we know the name of the pills, we must get them to buy some for your Cousin Lin,' said Lady Wang.

'None of those things are any good,' said Bao-yu. 'You give me three hundred and sixty taels of silver and I'll make up some pills for Cousin Lin that I guarantee will have her completely cured before she has finished the first boxful.'

'Stuff!' said Lady Wang. 'Whoever heard of a medicine that cost so much?'

'No, honestly!' said Bao-yu. 'This prescription is a very unusual one with very special ingredients. I can't remember all of them, but I know they include

the caul of a first-born child;
a ginseng root shaped like a man, with

the leaves still on it;

a turtle-sized polygonum root;

and

lycoperdon from the stump of a thousand-year-old pine-tree.

—Actually, though, there's nothing so *very* special about those ingredients. They're all in the standard pharmacopoeia. For "sovereign remedies" they use ingredients that would *really* make you jump. I once gave the prescription for one to Cousin Xue. He was more than a year begging me for it before I would give it to him, and it took him another two or three years and nearly a thousand taels of silver to get all the ingredients together. Ask Bao-chai if you don't believe me, Mother.'

'I know nothing about it,' said Bao-chai. 'I've never heard it mentioned. It's no good telling Aunt to ask *me*.'

'You see! Bao-chai is a *good* girl. *She* doesn't tell lies,' said Lady Wang.

Bao-yu was standing in the middle of the floor below the kang. He clapped his hands at this and turned to the others appealingly.

'But it's the *truth* I'm telling you. This is no lie.'

As lie turned, he happened to catch sight of Dai-yu, who was sitting behind Bao-chai, stilling mockingly and stroking her cheek with her finger—which in sign4anguage means, 'You are a great big liar and you ought to be ashamed of yourself.'

But X-feng, who happened to be in the inner room supervising the laying of the table and had overheard the preceding remarks, now emerged into the outer room to corroborate:

'It's quite true, what Bao says. I don't think he is making it up,' she said. 'Not so long ago Cousin Xue came to me asking for some pearls, and when I asked him what he wanted them for, he said, "To make medicine with." Then he started grumbling about the trouble he was having in getting the right ingredients and how he had half a mind not to make this medicine up after all. I said, "What medicine?" and he told me that it was a prescription that Cousin Bao had given him and reeled off a lot of ingredients—I can't remember them now. "Of course," he said, "I could easily enough *buy* a few pearls; only these have to be ones that have been worn. That's why I'm asking *you* for them. If you haven't got any loose ones, he said, "a few pearls broken off a bit of jewellery would do. I'd get you something nice to replace it with." He was so insistent that in the end I had to break up two of my ornaments for him. Then he wanted a yard of Imperial **red** gauze. That was to put over the mortar to pound the pearls through. He said they had to be ground until they were as fine as flour.'

'You see I' 'You see!' Bao-yu kept interjecting throughout this recital.

'Incidentally, Mother,' he said, when it was ended, 'even *that* was only a substitute. According to the prescription, the pearls ought really to have come from an ancient grave. They should really have been pearls taken from jewellery on the corpse of a long-buried noblewoman. But as one can't very well go digging up graves and riding tombs every time one wants. to make this medicine, the prescription allows pearls worn by the living as a second-best.'

'Blessed name of the Lord!' said Lady Wang. 'What a *dreadful* idea! Even if you *did* get them from a grave, I can't believe that a medicine made from pearls that had been come. by so wickedly—desecrating people's bones that had been lying peacefully in the ground all those hundreds of years—could possibly do you any good.'

Bao-yu turned to Dai-yu.

'Did you hear what Feng said?' he asked her. 'J hope you're not going to say that *she* was lying.'

Although the remark was addressed to Dai-yu, he winked at Bao-chai as he made it.

Dai-yu clung to Lady Wang.

'Listen to him, Aunt I' she wailed. 'Bao-chai won't be a party to his lies, but he still expects *me* to be.'

'Bao-yu, you are very unkind to your cousin,' said Lady Wang.

Bao-yu only laughed.

'You don't know the reason, Mother. Bao-chai didn't know a half of what Cousin Xue got up to, even when she was living with her mother outside; and now that she's moved into the Garden, she knows even less. When she said she didn't know, she *really* didn't know: she wasn't giving me the lie. What you don't realize is that Cousin Lin was all the time sitting behind her making signs to show that she didn't believe me.'

Just then a maid came from Grandmother Jia's apartment to fetch Bao-yu and Dai-yu to lunch.

Without saying a word to Bao-yu, Dai-yu got up and, taking the maid's hand, began to go. But the maid was reluctant.

'Let's wait for Master Bao and we can go together.'

'He's not eating lunch today,' said Dai-yu. 'Come on, let's go!'

'Whether he's eating lunch or not,' said the maid, 'he'd better come with us, so that he can explain to Her Old Ladyship about it when she asks.'

'All right, you wait for him then,' said Dai-yu. 'I'm going on ahead.'

And off she went.

'I think I'd rather eat with you today, Mother,' said Bao-yu. 'No, no, you can't,' said Lady Wang. 'Today is one of my fast-days: I shall only be eating vegetables. You go and have a proper meal with your Grandma.'

'I shall share your vegetables,' said Bao-yu. Go on, you can go,' he said, dismissing the maid; and rushing up to the table, he sat himself down at it in readiness.

'You others had better get on with your own lunch,' Lady Wang said to Bao-chai and the girls. 'Let him do as he likes.'

'You really ought to go,' Bao-chai said to Bao-yu. 'Whether you have lunch there or not, you ought to keep Cousin Lin company. She is very upset, you know. Why don't you?'

'Oh, leave her alone!' said Bao-yu. 'She'll be all right presently.'

Soon they had finished eating, and Bao-yu, afraid that Grandmother Jia might be worrying and at the same time anxious to rejoin Dai-yu, hurriedly demanded tea to rinse his mouth with. Tan-chun and Xi-chun were much amused.

'Why are you always in such a hurry, Bao?' they asked him. 'Even your eating and drinking all seems to be done in a rush.'

'You should let him finish quickly, so that he can get back to his Dai-yu,' said Bao-chai blandly. 'Don't make him waste time here with us.'

Bao-yu left as soon as he had drunk his tea, and made straight for the west courtyard where his Grandmother Jia's apartment was. But as he was passing by the gateway of Xi-feng's courtyard, it happened that Xi-feng herself was standing in her doorway with one foot on the threshold, grooming her teeth with an ear-cleaner and keeping a watchful eye on nine or ten pages who were moving potted plants about under her direction.

'Ah, just the person I wanted to see!' she said, as soon as she caught sight of Bao-yu. 'Come inside. I want you to write something down for me.

Bao-yu was obliged to follow her indoors. Xi-feng called for some paper, an inkstone and a brush, and at once began dictating:

‘**Crimson** lining-damask forty lengths, dragonet figured satin forty lengths, miscellaneous Imperial gauze one hundred lengths, gold necklets four, —’

‘Here, what *is* this?’ said Bao-yu. ‘It isn’t an invoice and it isn’t a presentation list. How am I supposed to write it?’

‘Never you mind about that,’ said Xi-feng. ‘As long as *I* know what it is, that’s all that matters. just put it down anyhow.’

Bao-yu wrote down the four items. As soon as he had done so, Xi-feng took up the paper and folded it away.

‘Now,’ she said, smiling pleasantly, ‘there’s something I want to talk to you about. I don’t know whether you’ll agree to this or not, but there’s a girl in your room called “Crimson” whom I’d like to work for me. If I find you someone to replace her with, will you let me have her?’

‘There are so many girls in my room,’ said Bao-yu. ‘Please take any you have a fancy to. You really don’t need to ask me about it.’

‘In that case,’ said Xi-feng, ‘I’ll send for her straight away.’

‘Please do,’ said Bao-yu, and started to go.

‘Hey, come back!’ said Xi-feng. ‘I haven’t finished with you yet.’

‘I’ve got to see Grandma now,’ said Bao-yu. ‘If you’ve got anything else to say, you can tell me on my way back.’

When he got to Grandmother Jia’s apartment, they had all just finished lunch. Grandmother Jia asked him if he bad had anything nice to eat with his mother.

‘There wasn’t anything nice,’ he said. ‘But I had an extra bowl of rice.’

Then, after the briefest pause:

‘Where’s Cousin Lin ?’

‘In the inner room;’ said Grandmother Jia.

In the inner room a maid stood below the kang blowing on a flat-iron. Up on the kang two maids were marking some material with a chalked string, while Dai-yu, her head bent low over her work, was engaged in cutting something from it with her shears.

‘What are you making? ‘he asked her. ‘You’ll give yourself a headache, stooping down like that immediately after your lunch.’

Dai-yu took no notice and went on cutting.

‘That corner looks a bit creased still,’ said one of the maids. ‘it will have to be ironed again.’

‘Leave it alone!’ said Dai-yu, laying down her shears. *‘It will be all right presently.’*

Bao-yu found her reply puzzling.

Bao-chai, Tan-chun and the rest had now arrived in the outer room and were talking to Grandmother Jia. Presently Bao-chai drifted inside and asked Dai-yu what she was doing; then, when she saw that she was cutting material, she exclaimed admiringly.

‘What a lot of things you can do, Dai! Fancy, even dress-making now!’

Dai-yu smiled malignantly.

‘Oh, it’s all lies, really. I just do it to fool people.’

‘I’ve got something to tell you that I think will amuse you, Dai,’ said Bao-chai pleasantly. ‘When our cousin was holding forth about that medicine just now and I said I didn’t know about it, I believe actually he was rather wounded.’

Oh, leave him alone!' said Dai-yu. 'He will be all right presently.

'Grandma wants someone to play dominoes with,' said Bao-yu to Bao-chai. 'Why don't you go and play dominoes?'

'Oh, is *that* what I came for?' said Bao-chai; but she went, notwithstanding.

'Why don't you go?' said Dai-yu. 'There's a tiger in this room. You might get eaten.'

She said this still bending over her cutting, which she continued to work away at without looking up at him.

Finding himself once more ignored, Bao-yu nevertheless attempted to remain jovial.

'Why don't you come out for a bit too? You can do this cutting later.'

Dai-yu continued to take no notice.

Falling to get a response from her, he tried the maids:

'Who told her to do this dress-making?'

'Whoever told her to do it,' said Dai-yu, 'it has nothing whatever to do with Master Bao.'

Bao-yu was about to retort, but just at that moment someone came in to say that he was wanted outside, and he was obliged to hurry off.

Dai-yu leaned forward and shouted after him:

'Holy name! By the time you get back, I shall be dead.'

*

Outside the gateway to the inner quartets Bao-yu found Tea-leaf waiting.

'Mr Feng invites you round to his house,' said Tealeaf.

Bao-yu realized that this must be in connection with the matter Feng Zi-ying had spoken of on the previous day. He told Tealeaf to send for his going-out clothes, and went into his outer study to wait for them.

Tealeaf went back to the west inner gate to wait for some-one who would carry a message inside to the maids. Presently an old woman came out:

'Excuse me, missus,' said Tealeaf. 'Master Bao is waiting in the outer study for his going-out clothes. Could you take a message inside to say that lie wants them?'

'—your mother's twat!' said the old woman. 'Master Bao lives in the Garden now. All his maids are in the Garden. What do you want to come running round here for?'

Tealeaf laughed at his own mistake.

'You're quite right. I'm going cuckoo.'

He ran round to the gate of the Garden. As luck would have it, the boys on that gate were playing football in the open space below the terraced walk, and when Tealeaf had explained his errand, one of them ran off inside for him. He returned after a very long wait, carrying a large bundle, which he handed to Tealeaf, and which Tealeaf carried back to the outer study.

While he was changing, Bao-yu asked for his horse to be saddled, and presently set off, taking only Tealeaf, Ploughboy, Two-times and Oldie as his attendants. When they reached Feng Zi-ying's gate, someone ran in to announce his arrival, and Feng Zi-ying came out in person to greet him and led him inside to meet the company.

This comprised Xue Pan, who had evidently been waiting there for some time, a number of boy singers, a female impersonator called Jiang Yu-han and a girl called Nuageuse from the Budding Grove, a high-class establishment specializing in female entertainers. When everyone had been introduced, tea was served.

'Now come on!' said Bao-yu, as he picked up the proffered cup of tea. 'What about this "lucky accident"

you mentioned yesterday? I've been waiting anxiously to hear about it ever since I saw you. That's why I came so promptly when I got your invitation.'

Feng Zi-ying laughed.

'You and your cousin are such simple souls—I find it rahver touchin'! Afraid it was pure invention, what I said yesterday. I said it to make you come, because I fought that if I asked you outright to come and drink wiv me, you'd make excuses. Anyway, it worked.'

The company joined in his merriment.

Wine was now brought in and everyone sat down in the places assigned to them. Feng Zi-ying first got one of the singing-boys to pour for them; then he called on Nuageuse to drink with each of the guests in turn.

Xue Pan, by the time he had three little cupfuls of wine inside him, was already beginning to be obstreperous. He seized Nuageuse by the hand and drew her towards him:

'If you'd sing me a nice new song - one of your specials, I'd drink a whole jarful for you. How about it, eh?'

Nuageuse had to oblige him by taking up her lute and singing the following song for him to her own accompaniment:

Two lovely boys
Are both in love with me
And I can't get either from my mind.
Both are so beautiful
So wonderful
So marvellous
To give up either one would be unkind.
Last night I promised I would go
To meet one of them in the garden where the roses grow;
The other came to see what he could find.
And now that we three are all
Here in this tribunal,
There are no words that come into my mind.

'There you are I' she said. 'Now drink your jarful!'

'That one's not worth a jarful,' said Xue Pan. 'Sing us a better one.'

'Now just a minute,' said Bao-yu. 'Just guzzling like this will make us drunk in no time without giving us any real enjoyment. I've got a good new drinking-game for you. Let me first drink the M. C.'s starting-cup, and I'll tell you the rules. After that, anyone who doesn't toe the line will be made to drink ten Sconce-cups straight off as a forfeit, give up his seat at the party, and spend the rest of the time pouring Out drinks for the rest of us.'

Feng Zi-ying and Jiang Yu-han agreed enthusiastically, and Bao-yu picked up one of the extra large cups that had now been provided and drained its contents at a single draught.

'Now,' he said. 'We're going to take four words—let's say "upset", "glum", "blest" and "content". You have to begin by saying "The girl is—", and then you say one of the four words. That's your first line. The next line has to rhyme with the first line and it has to give the reason why the girl is whatever it says— "upset or glum" or "blest" or content When you've done all four, you're entitled to drink the wine in front of you. Only,

before drinking it, you've first got to sing some new popular song; and *after* you've drunk it, you've got to choose some animal or vegetable object from the things in front of us and recite a line from a well-known poem, or an old couplet, or a quotation from the classics—'

Before he could finish, Xue Pan was on his feet, protesting vigorously:

'You can count *me* out of this *I'm* taking no part in this. This is just to make a fool of me, isn't it?'

Nuageuse, too, stood up and attempted to push him back into his seat:

'What are you so afraid of, a practiced drinker like you? You can't be any worse at this sort of thing than I am, and *I'm* going to have a go when *my* turn comes. If you do it all right, you've got nothing to worry about, and even if you can't, you'll only be made to drink a few cups of wine; whereas if you refuse to follow the rules at the very outset, you'll have to drink ten sconces straight off in a row and then be thrown out of the party and made to pour drinks for the rest of us.'

'Bravo!' cried the others, clapping; and Xue Pan, seeing them united against him, subsided.

Bao-yu now began his own turn:

'The girl's upset:
The years pass by, but no one's claimed her yet.
The girl looks glum:
Her true-love's gone to follow ambition's drum.
The girl feels blest:
The mirror shows her looks are at their best.
The girl's content:
Long summer days in pleasant pastimes spent.'

The others all applauded, except Xue Pan, who shook his head disapprovingly:

'No good, no good!' he said. 'Pay the forfeit.'

'Why, what's wrong with it?' they asked him.

'I couldn't understand a word of it.'

Nuageuse gave him a pinch:

'Keep quiet and try to think what you're going to say,' she advised him; 'otherwise you'll have nothing ready when your own turn comes and you'll have to pay the forfeit yourself.'

Thereupon she picked up her lute and accompanied Bao-yu as he sang the following song:

'Still weeping tears of blood about our separation:
Little **red** love-beans of my desolation.
Still blooming flowers I see outside my window growing.
Still awake in the dark I hear the wind a-blowing.
Still oh still I can't forget those old hopes and fears.
Still can't swallow food and drink, 'cos I'm choked with tears.
Mirror, mirror on the wall, tell me it's not true:
Do I look so thin and pale, do I look so **blue**?
Mirror, mirror, this long night bow shall I get through?
Oh—oh—oh!

Blue as the mist upon the distant mountains,
Blue as the water in the ever-flowing fountains.'

General applause—except from Xue Pan, who objected that there was 'no rhythm'.

Bao-yu now drank his well-earned cup—the 'pass cup' as they call it—and, picking up a slice of pear from the table, concluded his turn with the following quotation:

'Rain whips the pear-tree, shut fast the door.'

Now it was Feng Zi-ying's turn:

'The girl's upset:
Her husband's ill and she's in debt.
The girl looks glum:
The gale has turned her room into a slum.
The girl feels blest:
She's got twin babies at the breast.
The girl's content:
Waiting a certain pleasurable event.'

Next, holding up his cupful of wine in readiness to drink, he sang this song:

'You're so exciting,
And so inviting;
You're my Mary Contrary;
You're a crazy, mad thing.
You're my goddess, but oh I you're deaf to my praying:
Why won't you listen to what I am saying?
If you don't believe me, make a small investigation:
You will soon find out the true depth of my admiration.'

Then he drained his bumper and, picking up a piece of chicken from one of the dishes, ended the performance, prior to popping it into his mouth, with a line from Wen Ting-yun:

'From moonlit cot the cry of chanticleer.'

Next it was the turn of Nuageuse:

'The girl's upset:'

she began,

'Not knowing how the future's to be met—'

Xue Pan laughed noisily.

'That's all right, my darling, don't you worry! Your Uncle Xue will take care of you.'

'Shush I' said the others. 'Don't confuse her.'

She continued:

'The girl looks glum:

Nothing but blows and hard words from her Mum—,

‘I saw that Mum of yours the other day,’ said Xue Pan, ‘and I particularly told her that she wasn’t to beat you.’

‘Another word from you,’ said the others, ‘and you’ll be made to drink ten cups as a punishment.’

Xue Pan gave his own face a slap.

‘Sorry! I forgot. Won’t do it again.’

‘The girl feels blest:’
said Nuageuse,
‘Her young man’s rich and beautifully dressed.
The girl’s content:
She’s been performing in a big event.’

Next Nuageuse sang her song:

‘A flower began to open in the month of May.
Along came a honey-bee to sport and play.
He pushed and he squeezed to get inside,
But he couldn’t get in however hard he tried.
So on the flower’s lip he just hung around,
A- playing the see-saw up and down.
Oh my honey-sweet,
Oh my sweets of sin,
If I don’t open up,
How will you get in?’

After drinking her ‘pass cup’; she picked up a peach:

‘So bonny blooms the peach-tree-o?

It was now Xue Pan’s turn.

‘Ah yes, now, let’s see! *I* have to say something now, don’t I?’

‘The girl’s upset—’

But nothing followed.

‘All night, what’s 8he upset about then?’ said Feng Zi-ying with a laugh. ‘Buck up!’

Xue Pan appeared to be engaged in a species of mental effort so frightful that his eyes seemed about to pop out of his head. After glaring fixedly for an unconscionable time, he said:

‘The girl’s upset—’

He coughed a couple of times. Then at last it came:

‘The girl’s upset:

She's married to a marmoset.'

The others greeted this with a roar of laughter.

'What are you laughing at?' said Xue Pan. 'That's perfectly reasonable, isn't it? If a girl was expecting a proper husband and he turned out to be one of *them*, she'd have cause to be upset, wouldn't she ?'

His audience were by now doubled up.

'That's perfectly true,' they conceded. 'Very good. Now what about the next bit?'

Xue Pan glared a while very concentratedly, then:

'The girl looks glum—'

But after that was silence.

'Come on!' said the others. 'Why was she glum?'

'His dad's a baboon with a big **red** bum.'

'Ho! Ho! Ho! Pay the forfeit,' they cried. 'The first one was bad enough. We really can't let this one go.'

The more officious of them even began filling the sconce-cups for him. But Bao-yu allowed the line.

'As long as it rhymes,' he said, 'we'll let it pass.'

'There you are! ' said Xue Pan. 'The M. C. says it's all right. What are the rest of you making such a fuss about?'

At this the others desisted.

'The next two are even harder,' said Nuageuse. 'Shall I do them for you, dear?'

'Piss off!' said Xue Pan. 'D'you think I haven't got any good lines of my own? Listen to this:

The girl feels blest:
In bridal bower she takes her rest.'

The others stared at 'him in amazement:

'I say, old chap, that's a bit poetical for you, isn't it?' Xue Pan continued unconcernedly:

'The girls content:
She's got a big prick up her vent.'

The others looked away with expressions of disgust.

'Oh dear, oh dear! Hurry up and get on with the song, then.'

'One little gnat went hum hum hum,'

Xue Pan began tunelessly. The others looked at him open-mouthed:

'What sort of song is that?'

Xue Pan droned on, ignoring the question:

‘Two little flies went bum bum bum,
Three little—’

Stop!’ shouted the others.

‘Sod you lot!’ said Xue Pan. ‘This is the very latest new hit. It’s called the Hum-bum Song. If you can’t be bothered to listen to it, you’ll have to let me off the other thing. I’ll agree not to sing the rest of the song on that condition.’

‘Yes, yes, we’ll let you *off,’* they said. ‘Just don’t interfere with the rest of us, that’s all we ask.’

This meant that it was now Jiang Yu-han’s turn to perform. This is what he said:

‘The girl’s upset:
Her man’s away, she fears he will forget.
The girl looks glum:
So short of cash she can’t afford a crumb.
The girl feels blest:
Her lampwick’s got a lucky crest.
The girl’s content:
She’s married to a perfect gent’

Then he sang this song:

‘A mischievous bundle of charm and love,
Or an angel come down from the skies above?
Sweet sixteen
And so very **green,**
Yet eager to see all there is to be seen.
Aie aie aie
The galaxy’s high
In the roof of the sky,
And the drum from the tower
Sounds the midnight hour,
So trim the lamp, love, and come with me
Inside the bed-curtains, and you shall see!’

He raised the pass cup to his lips, but before drinking it, smiled round at his auditors and made this little speech:

‘I’m afraid my knowledge of poetry is strictly limited, However, I happened to see a couplet on someone’s wall yesterday which has stuck in my mind; and as one line in it is about something I can see here, I shall use it to finish my turn with.’

So saying, he drained the cup and then, picking up a spray of cassia, recited the following line:

‘The flowers’ aroma breathes of hotter days.’

The others all accepted this as a satisfactory conclusion of the performance. Not so Xue Pan, however, who leaped to his feet and began protesting noisily:

'Terrible! Pay the forfeit. Where's the little doll? I can't see any doll on the table.'

'I didn't say anything about a doll,' said Jiang Yu-han.

'What ate you talking about?'

'Come on, don't try to wriggle out of it!' said Xue Pan. 'Say what you said just now again.'

'The flowers' aroma breathes of hotter days.'

'There you are!' said Xue Pan.' "Aroma". That's the name of a little doll. Ask *him* if you don't believe me.' He pointed to Bao-yu.

Bao-yu looked embarrassed.

'Cousin Xue, this time I think you *do* have to pay the forfeit.'

'All right, all right!' said Xue Pan. 'I'll drink.'

And he picked up the wine in front of him and drained it at a gulp.

Feng Zi-ying and Jiang Yu-han were still puzzled and asked him what this was all about. But it was Nuageuse who explained. Immediately Jiang Yu-han was on his feet apologizing. The others reassured him.

'It's not your fault. "'Ignorance excuses all",' they said.

Shortly after this Bao-yu had to take temporary leave of the company to ease his bladder and Jiang Yu-han followed him outside. As the two of them stood side by side under the eaves, Jiang Yu-han once more offered Bao-yu his apologies. Much taken with the actor's winsome looks and gentleness of manner, Bao-yu impulsively took his hand and gave it a squeeze.

'Do come round to our place some time when you are free,' he said. 'There's something I want to ask you about. You have an actor in your company called "Bijou" whom everyone is talking about lately. I should so much like to meet him, but so far I haven't had an opportunity.'

'That's me!' said Jiang Yu-han. '"Bijou" is my stage name.'

Bao-yu stamped with delight.

'But this is wonderful! I must say, you fully deserve your reputation. Oh dear! What am I going to do about a First Meeting present?'

He thought for a bit, then took a fan from his sleeve and broke off its jade pendant.

'Here you are,' he said, handing it to Bijou. 'It's not much of a present, I'm afraid, but it will do to remind you of our meeting.'

Bijou smiled and accepted it ceremoniously:

'I have done nothing to deserve this favour. It is too great an honour. Well, thank you. There's rather an unusual thing I'm wearing I put it on today for the first time, so it's still fairly new: I wonder if you will allow me to give it to you as a token of my warm feelings towards you?'

He opened up his gown, undid the **crimson** cummerbund with which his trousers were fastened, and handed it to Bao-yu.

'It comes from the tribute sent by the Queen of the Madder Islands. It's for wearing in summer. It makes you smell nice and it doesn't show perspiration stains. I was given it yesterday by the Prince of Beijing, and today is the first time it s ever been worn. I wouldn't give a thing like this to anyone else, but I'd like you to have

it. Will you take your own sash off, please, so that I can put it on instead?'

Bao-yu received the **crimson** cummerbund with delight and quickly took off his own viridian-coloured sash to give to Bijou in exchange. They had just finished fastening the sashes on again when Xue Pan jumped out from behind and seized hold of them both.

'What are you two up to, leaving the party and sneaking off like this ?' he said. 'Come on, take 'em out again and let's have a look!'

It was useless for them to protest that the situation was not what he imagined. Xue Pan continued to force his unwelcome attentions upon them until Feng Zi-ying came out and rescued them. After that they returned to the party and continued drinking until the evening.

Back in his own apartment in the Garden, Bao-yu took off his outer clothes and relaxed with a cup of tea. While he did so, Aroma noticed that the pendant of his fan was missing and asked him what had become of it. Bao-yu told her that it had come off while he was riding, and she gave the matter no more thought. But later, when he was going to bed, she saw the magnificent blood-red sash round his waist and began to put two and two together.

'Since you've got a better sash now,' she said, 'do you think I could have mine back, please ?'

Bao-yu remembered, too late, that the viridian sash had been Aroma's and that he ought never to have given it away. He now very much regretted having done so, but instead of apologizing, attempted to pass it off with a laugh.

'I'll get you another,' he told her lightly.

Aroma shook her head and sighed.

'I knew you still got up to these tricks,' she said, 'but at least you might refrain from giving my things to those disgusting creatures. I'm surprised you haven't got more sense.'

She was going to say more, but checked herself for fear of provoking an explosion while he was in his cups. And since there was nothing else she could do, she went to bed.

She awoke at first daylight next morning to find Bao-yu smiling down at her

'We might have been burgled last night for all you'd have known about it—Look at your trousers!'

Looking down, Aroma saw the sash that Bao-yu had been wearing yesterday tied round her own waist, and knew that he must have exchanged it for hers during the night. She tore it off impatiently.

'I don't want the horrible thing. The sooner you take it away the better.'

Bao-yu was anxious that she should keep it, and after a great deal of coaxing she consented, very reluctantly, to tie it on again. But she took it off once and for all as soon as he was out of the room and threw it into an empty chest, having first found another one of her own to put on in its place.

Bao-yu made no comment on the change when they were together again. He merely inquired whether anything had happened the day before, while he was out.

'Mrs Lian sent someone round to fetch Crimson,' said Aroma. 'She wanted to wait for you; but it seemed to me that it wasn't all that important, so I took it on myself to send her off straight away.'

'Quite right,' said Bao-yu. 'I already knew about it. There was no need to wait till I got back.'

Aroma continued

'Her Grace sent that Mr Xia of the Imperial Bedchamber yesterday with a hundred and twenty taels of silver to pay for a three-day *Pro Viventibus* by the Taoists of the Lunar Queen temple starting on the first of next month There are to be plays performed as part of the Offering; and Mr Zhen and all the other gentlemen are to go there to burn incense. Oh, and Her Grace's presents for the Double Fifth have arrived.'

She ordered a little maid to get Out Bao-yu's share of the things sent. There were two Palace fans of exquisite workmanship, two strings of **red** musk-scented medicine-beads, two lengths of maidenhair chiffon and a grass-woven 'lotus' mat to lie on in the hot weather.

'Did the others all get the same?' he asked.

'Her Old Ladyship's presents were the same as yours with the addition of a perfume-sceptre and an agate head-rest, and Sir Zheng's, Lady Wang's and Mrs Xue's were the same as Her Old Ladyship's but without the head-rest; Miss Bao's were exactly the same as yours; Miss Lin, Miss Ying-chun, Miss Tan-chun and Miss Xi-chun got Only the fans and the beads; and Mrs Zhu and Mrs Lian both got two lengths of gauze, two lengths of chiffon, two perfume sachets and two moulded medicine-cakes.'

'Funny!' said Bao-yu. 'I wonder why Miss Lin didn't get the same as me and why only Miss Bao's and mine were the same. There must have been some mistake, surely ?'

'When they unpacked them yesterday, the separate lots were all labelled,' said Aroma. 'I don't see how there could have been any mistake. Your share was in Her Old Ladyship's room and I went round there to get it for you. Her Old Ladyship says she wants you to go to Court at four o'clock tomorrow morning to give thanks.'

'Yes, of course,' said Bao-yu inattentively, and gave Ripple instructions to take his presents round to Dai-yu:

'Tell Miss Lin that I got these things yesterday and that if there's anything there she fancies, I should like her to keep it.'

Ripple went off with the presents. She was back in a very short time, however.

'Miss Lin says she got some yesterday too, and will you please keep these for yourself.'

Bao-yu told her to put them away. As soon as he had washed, he left to pay his morning call on Grandmother Jia; but just as he was going out he saw Dai-yu coming towards him and hurried forward to meet her.

'Why didn't you choose anything from the things I sent you?'

Yesterday's resentments were now quite forgotten; today Dai-yu had fresh matter to occupy her mind.

'I'm not equal to the honour,' she said. 'You forget, I'm not in the gold and jade class like you and your Cousin Bao. I'm only a common little wall-flower!'

The reference to gold and jade immediately aroused Bao-yu's suspicions.

'I don't know what anyone else may have been saying on the subject,' he said, 'but if any such thought ever so much as crossed *my* mind, may Heaven strike me dead, and may I never be reborn as a human being!'

Seeing him genuinely bewildered, Dai-yu smiled in what was meant to be a reassuring manner.

'I wish you wouldn't make these horrible oaths. It's so disagreeable. Who *cares* about your silly old "gold and jade", anyway?'

'It's hard to make you *se* what is in my heart,' said Bao-yu. 'One day perhaps you will know. But I can tell you this. My heart has room for four people only. Grannie and my parents are three of them and Cousin Dai is the fourth. I swear to you there isn't a fifth.'

'There's no need for you to swear,' said Dai-yu. 'I know very well that Cousin Dai has a place in your heart. The trouble is that as soon as Cousin Chai comes along, Cousin Dai gets forgotten.'

'You imagine these things,' said Bao-yu. 'It really isn't as you say.

'Yesterday when Little Miss Bao wouldn't tell lies for you, why did you turn to *me* and expect *me* to? How would you like it if I did that sort of thing to you?'

Bao-chai happened to come along while they were still talking and the two of them moved aside to avoid

her. Bao-chai saw this clearly, but pretended not to notice and hurried by with lowered eyes. She went and sat with Lady Wang for a while and from there went on to Grandmother Jia's. Bao-yu was already at his grandmother's when she got there.

Bao-chai had on more than one occasion heard her mother telling Lady Wang and other people that the golden locket she wore had been given her by a monk, who had insisted that when she grew up the person she married must be Someone who had 'a jade to match the gold'. This was one of the reasons why she tended to keep aloof from Bao-yu. The slight embarrassment she always felt as a result of her mother's chatter had yesterday been greatly intensified when Yuan-chun singled her out as the only girl to receive the same selection of presents as Bao-yu. She was relieved to think that Bao-yu, so wrapped up in Dai-yu that his thoughts were only of her, was unaware of her embarrassment.

But now here was Bao-yu smiling at her with sudden interest.

'Cousin Bao, may I have a look at your medicine-beads?'

She happened to be wearing one of the little chaplets on her left wrist and began to pull it off now in obedience to his request. But Bao-chai was inclined to plumpness and perspired easily, and for a moment or two it would not come off While she was struggling with it, Bao-yu had ample opportunity to observe her snow-white arm, and a feeling rather warmer than admiration was kindled inside him.

'If that arm were growing on Cousin Lin's body,' he speculated, 'I might hope one day to touch it. What a pity it's hers I Now I shall never have that good fortune.'

Suddenly he thought of the curious coincidence of the gold and jade talismans and their matching inscriptions, which Dai-yu's remark had reminded him of. He looked again at Bao-chai—

> that face like the full moon's argent bowl;
> those eyes like sloes;
> those lips whose carmine hue no Art contrived;
> and brows by none but Nature's pencil lined.

This was beauty of quite a different order from Dai-yu's. Fascinated by it, he continued to stare at her with a somewhat dazed expression) so that when she handed him the chaplet, which she had now succeeded in getting off her wrist, he failed to take it from her.

Seeing that he had gone off into one of his trances, Bao-chai threw down the chaplet in embarrassment and turned to go. But Dai-yu was standing on the threshold, biting a corner of her handkerchief, convulsed with silent laughter.

'I thought you were so delicate,' said Bao-chai. 'What are you standing there in the draught for?'

'I've been in the room all the time,' said Dai-yu. 'I just this moment went to have a look outside because I heard the sound of something in the sky. It was a gawping goose.'

'Where?' said Bao-chai. 'Let *me* have a look.'

'Oh,' said Dai-yu, 'as soon as I went outside he flew away with a *whir-r-r-*'

She flicked her long handkerchief as she said this in the direction of Bao-yu's face.

'Ow!' he exclaimed—She had flicked him in the eye.

The extent of the damage will be examined in the following chapter.

In which the greatly blessed pray for yet greater blessings
And the highly strung rise to new heights of passion

WE told in the last chapter how, as Bao-yu was standing lost in one of his trances, Dai-yu flicked her handkerchief at him and made him jump by inadvertently catching him in the eye with it.

'Who did that?' he asked.

Dai-yu laughingly shook her head.

'I'm sorry. I didn't mean to. Bao-chai wanted to look at a *gawping goose,* and I accidentally flicked you while I was showing her how it went.'

Bao-yu rubbed his eye. He appeared to be about to say something, but then thought better of it.

And so the matter passed.

*

Shortly after this incident Xi-feng arrived and began talking about the arrangements that had been made for the purification ceremonies, due to begin on the first of next month at the Taoist temple of the Lunar Goddess. She invited Bao-chai, Bao-yu and Dai-yu to go with her there to watch the plays.

'Oh *no* I' said Bao-chai. 'It's too *hot.* Even if they were to do something we haven't seen before—which isn't likely—I think I should still not want to go.'

'But it's *cool* there,' said Xi-feng. 'There are upstairs galleries on all three sides that you can watch from in the shade. And if we go, I shall send someone a day or two in advance to turn the Taoists out of that part of the temple and make it nice and clean for us and get them td put up blinds. And I'll ask them not to let any other visitors in on that day. I've already told Lady Wang I'm going, so if you others won't come with me,. I shall go by myself. I'm so bored lately. And it's such a business when we put on our own plays at home, that I can never enjoy them properly.'

'All right then, *I'll* come,' said Grandmother Jia, who had been listening.

'You'll come, Grannie? Well that's splendid, isn't it I That means it will be just as bad for me as it would be if I were watching here at home.'

'Now look here,' said Grandmother Jia, 'I shan't want you to stand and wait on me. Let me take the gallery facing the stage and you can have one of the side galleries all to yourself; then you can sit down and enjoy yourself in comfort.'

Xi-feng was touched.

'Do come!' Grandmother Jia said to Bao-chai. 'I'll see that your mother comes too. The days are so long now, and there's nothing to do at home except go to sleep.'

Bao-chai had to promise that she would go.

Grandmother Jia now sent someone to invite Aunt Xue. The messenger was to call in on the way at Lady Wang's and ask her if the girls might go as well.

Lady Wang had already made it clear that she would not be going herself, partly because she was not feeling very well, and partly because she wanted to be at home in case any further messages arrived from

Yuan-chun; but when she learned of Grandmother Jia's enthusiasm, she had word carried into the Garden that not just the girls but anyone else who wanted to might go along with Grandmother Jia's party on the first.

When this exciting news had been transmitted throughout the Garden, the maids some of whom hardly set foot outside their own courtyards from one year's end to the next were all dying to go, and those whose mistresses showed a lethargic disinclination to accept employed a hundred different wiles to make sure that they did so. The result was that in the end *all* the Garden's inhabitants said that they would be going. Grandmother Jia was quite elated and at once issued orders for the cleaning and preparation of the temple theatre.

But these are details with which we need not concern ourselves.

On the morning of the first sedans, carriages, horses and people filled all the roadway outside Rong-guo House. The stewards in charge knew that the occasion of this outing was a *Pro Viventibus* ordered by Her Grace the Imperial Concubine and that Her Old Ladyship was going in person to burn incense—quite apart from the fact that this was the first day of the month and the first day of the Summer Festival; consequently the turnout was as splendid as they could make it and far exceeded anything that had been seen on previous occasions.

Presently Grandmother Jia appeared, seated, in solitary splendour, in a large palanquin carried by eight bearers. Li Wan, Xi-feng and Aunt Xue followed, each in a palanquin with four bearers. After them came Bao-chai and Dai-yu sharing a carriage with a splendid turquoise-coloured canopy trimmed with pearls. The carriage after them, in which Ying chun, Tan-chun and Xi-chun sat, had vermilion-painted wheels and was shaded with a large embroidered umbrella. After them rode Grandmother Jia's maids, Faithful, Parrot, Amber and Pearl; after them Lin Dai-yu's maids, Nightingale, Snowgoose and Delicate; then Bao-chai's maids, Oriole and Apricot; then Ying-chun's maids, Chess and Tangerine; then Tan-chun's maids, Scribe and Ebony; then Xi-chun's maids, Picture and Landscape; then Aunt Xue's maids, Providence and Prosper, sharing a carriage with Caltrop and Caltrop's own maid, Advent; then Li Wan's maids, Candida and Casta; then Xi-feng's own maids, Patience, Felicity and Crimson, with two of Lady Wang's maids, Golden and Suncloud, whom Xi-feng had agreed to take with her, in the carriage behind. In the carriage after them sat another couple of maids and a nurse holding Xi-feng's little girl. Yet more carriages followed carrying the nannies and old women from the various apartments and the women whose duty it was to act as duennas when the ladies of the household went Out of doors. The street was packed with carriages as far as the eye could see in either direction, and Grandmother Jia's palanquin was well on the way to the temple before the last passengers in the rear had finished taking their places. A confused hubbub of laughter and chatter rose from the line of carriages while they were doing so, punctuated by an occasional louder and more distinctly audible protest, such as:

'I'm not sitting next *to you*!'

or,

'You're squashing the Mistress's bundle!'

or,

'Look, you've trodden on my spray!'

or,

'You've ruined my fan, clumsy!'

Zhou Rui's wife walked up and down calling for some order:

'Girls! Girls! You're out in the street now, where people can see you. A little behaviour, *please!'*

She had to do this several times before the clamour subsided somewhat.

The footmen and insignia-bearers at the front of the procession had now reached the temple, and as the files of their column opened Out to range themselves on either side of the gateway, the onlookers lining the sides of

the street were able to see Bao-yu on a splendidly caparisoned white horse riding at the head of the procession immediately in front of his grandmother's great palanquin with its eight bearers. As Grandmother Jia and her party approached the temple, there was a crash of drums and cymbals from the roadside. It was the Taoists of the temple come out to welcome them, with old Abbot Zhang at their head, resplendent in cope and vestments and with a burning joss-stick in his hand.

The palanquin passed through the gateway and into the first courtyard. From her seat inside it Grandmother Jia could see the terrifying painted images of the temple guardians, one on each side of the inner gate, flanked by that equally ferocious pair, Thousand League Eye with his **blue** face and Favourable Wind Ear with his **green** one, and farther on, the benigner forms of the City God and the little Local Gods. She ordered the bearers to halt, and Cousin Zhen at the head of the younger male members of the clan came forward from the inner courtyard to meet her.

Xi-feng, whose palanquin was nearest to Grandmother Jia's, realized that Faithful and the other maids were too far back in the procession to be able to reach the old lady in time to help her out, and hurried forward to perform this service herself. Unfortunately a little eleven- or twelve-year-old acolyte, who had been going round with a pair of snuffers trimming the wicks of the numerous candles that were burning everywhere and whom the arrival of the procession had caught unawares, chose this very moment to attempt a getaway and ran head-on into her. Out flew Xi-feng's hand and dealt him a resounding smack on the face that sent him flying.

'Clumsy brat!' she shouted. 'Look where you're going!'

The little acolyte picked himself up and, leaving his snuffers where they had fallen, darted off in the direction of the gate. But by now Bao-chai and the other young ladies were getting down from their carriages and a phalanx of women-servants clustered all round them, making egress impossible. Seeing a little Taoist running towards them, the women began to scream and shout:

'Catch him! Catch him! Hit him! Hit him!'

'What is it?' asked Grandmother Jia in alarm, hearing this hubbub behind her, and Cousin Zhen went forward to investigate.

'It's one of the young acolytes,' said Xi-feng as she helped the old lady from her conveyance. 'He was snuffing the candles and didn't get away in time and now he's rushing around trying to find a way out.'

'Bring him to me, poor little thing!' said Grandmother Jia. 'And don't frighten him. These children from poorer families have generally been rather spoiled. You can't expect them to stand up to great occasions like this. It would be a shame to frighten the poor little thing out of his wits. Think how upset his mother and father would be. Go on !~' she said to Cousin Zhen. 'Go and fetch him yourself'

Cousin Zhen was obliged to retrieve the little Taoist in person and led him by the hand to Grandmother Jia. The boy knelt down in front of her, the snuffers—now restored to him –clutched in one hand, trembling like a leaf. Grandmother Jia asked Cousin Zhen to raise him to his feet.

'Don't be afraid,' she told the boy. 'How old are you?'

But the little boy's mouth was hurting him too badly to speak.

'*Poor* little thing!' said Grandmother Jia. 'You'd better take him away, Zhen. Give him some money to buy sweeties with and tell the others that they are not to grumble at him.'

Cousin Zhen had to promise, and led the boy away, while the old lady led *her* party inside to begin a systematic tour of the shrines.

The pages in the outer courtyard, who had a moment before witnessed Grandmother Jia and her train trooping through the gateway that led into the inner courtyard, were surprised to see Cousin Zhen now emerging

from it again with a little Taoist in tow. They heard him say that the boy was to be taken out and given a few hundred cash and that he was to be treated kindly. A few of them came forward and led the child away in obedience to his instructions.

Still standing at the top of the steps to the inner gate, Cousin Zhen inquired what had become of the stewards.

'Steward! Steward!' shouted the pages in unison, and almost immediately Lin Zhi-xiao came running out from heaven knows where, adjusting his hat with one hand as he ran.

'This is a big place,' said Cousin Zhen when Lin Zhi-xiao was standing in front of him, 'and we weren't expecting so many here today. I want you to take all the people you need and stay here in this courtyard with them. Those you don't need here can wait in the second courtyard. And pick some reliable boys to go on this gate and the two posterns to pass word through to those outside if those inside need anything Do you understand? All the ladies are here today and I don't want any outsiders to get in Is that understood?'

'Yes sir!' said Lin Zhi-xiao. 'Sir!'

'Well get on with it!' said Cousin Zhen. 'Where's Rong got to?'

The words were scarcely out of his mouth when Jia Rong came bounding out of the bell-tower, buttoning his jacket as he ran.

'Look at him!' said Cousin Zhen irately. 'Enjoying him-self in the cool while I am roasting down here! Spit at him, someone.'

Long familiarity with Cousin Zhen's temper had taught the boys that he would brook no opposition when roused. One of them obediently stepped forward and spat in Jia Rong's face; then, as Cousin. Zhen continued to glare at him, he rebuked Jia Rong for presuming to be cool while his father was still sweating outside in the sun. Jia Rong was obliged to stand with his arms hanging submissively at his sides throughout this public humiliation, not dating to utter a word.

The other members of Jia Rong's generation who were present—Jia Yun, Jia Ping, Jia Qin and the rest—were greatly alarmed by this outburst; indeed, even the clansmen of Cousin Zhen's own generation—the Jia Bins and Jia Huangs and Jia Qiongs—were to be seen putting their hats on and slinking out, one by one, from the shadow of the walls.

'What are you standing here for?' said Cousin Zhen to Jia Rong. 'Why don't you get on your horse and go back home and tell your mother and that new wife of yours that Her Old Ladyship is here with all the Rong-guo girls. Tell them they must come here at once to wait on her.'

Jia Rong ran outside and began bawling impatiently for his horse. 'What on earth can have got into him that he should suddenly have picked on me like that?' he muttered to himself resentfully; then, as his horse had still not arrived, he shouted angrily at the grooms

'Come on, bring that horse, damn you! Are your hands tied or something?'

He would have liked to send a boy in his place, but was afraid that if he did, his father would find out when he went back later to report; and so, when the horse arrived, he mounted and rode off home.

Cousin Zhen was about to turn and go in again when he discovered old Abbot Zhang at his elbow, smiling somewhat unnaturally.

'Perhaps I don't come in quite the same category as the others,' said the old Taoist. 'Perhaps I should be allowed inside to wait on Her Old Ladyship. However. In this inclement heat, and with so many young ladies about, I shouldn't like to presume. I will do whatever you say. I *did* just wonder whether Her Old Ladyship might ask for me, or whether she might require a guide to take her round the shrines…However. Perhaps it would be

best if I waited here.'

Cousin Zhen was aware that, though Abbot Zhang had started life a poor boy and entered the Taoist church as 'proxy novice of Grandmother Jia's late husband, a former Emperor had with his own Imperial lips conferred on him the title 'Doctor Mysticus', and he now held the seals of the Board of Commissioners of the Taoist Church, had been awarded the title 'Doctor Serenissimus' by the reigning sovereign, and was addressed as 'Holiness' by princes, dukes and governors of provinces. He was therefore not a man to be trifled with. Moreover he was constantly in and out of the two mansions and on familiar terms with most of the Jia ladies. Cousin Zhen at once became affable.

'Oh, you're one of the family, Papa Zhang, so let's have no more of that kind of talk, or I'll take you by that old beard of yours and give it a good pull. Come on, follow me!'

Abbot Zhang followed him inside, laughing delightedly.

Having found Grandmother Jia, Cousin Zhen ducked and smiled deferentially.

'Papa Zhang has come to pay his respects, Grannie'

'Help him, then!' said Grandmother Jia; and Cousin Zhen hurried back to where Abbot Zhang was waiting a few yards behind him and supported him by an elbow into her presence. The abbot prefaced his greeting with a good deal of jovial laughter.

'Blessed Buddha of Boundless Life! And how has Your Old Ladyship been all this while? In rude good health, I trust? And Their Ladyships, and all the younger ladies?—also flourishing? It's quite a while since I was at the mansion to call on Your Old Ladyship, but I declare you look more blooming than ever!'

'And how are you, old Holy One?' Grandmother Jia asked him with a pleased smile.

'Thank Your Old Ladyship for asking. I still keep pretty fit. But never mind about that. What *I* want to know. is, how's our young hero been keeping, eh? We were celebrating the blessed Nativity of the Veiled King here on the twenty-sixth. Very select little gathering. Tasteful offerings. I thought Our young friend might have enjoyed it; but when I sent round to invite him, they told me he was out.'

'He really *was* out,' said Grandmother Jia, and turned aside to summon the 'young hero'; but Bao-yu had gone to the lavatory. He came hurrying forward presently.

'Hallo, Papa Zhang! How are you?'

The old Taoist embraced him affectionately and returned his greeting.

'He's beginning to fill out,' he said, addressing Grandmother Jia.

'He looks well enough on the outside,' said Grandmother Jia, 'but underneath he's delicate. And his Pa doesn't improve matters by forcing him to study all the time. I'm afraid he'll end up by *making* the child ill.'

'Lately I've been seeing calligraphy and poems of his in all kinds of places,' said Abbot Zhang, '—all quite remarkably good. I really can't understand why Sir Zheng is concerned that the boy doesn't study enough. If you ask me, I think he's all right as he is.' He sighed. 'Of course, you know who this young man reminds me of, don't you? Whether it's his looks or the way he talks or the way he moves, to me he's the spit and image of Old Sir Jia.'

The old man's eyes grew moist, and Grandmother Jia herself showed a disposition to be tearful.

'It's quite true,' she said. 'None of our children or our children's children turned Out like him, except my Bao. Only my little Jade Boy is like his grandfather.'

'Of course, your generation wouldn't remember Old Sir Jia,' Abbot Zhang said, turning to Cousin Zhen. 'it's before your time. In fact, I don't suppose even Sir She and Sir Zheng can have a very clear recollection of what their father was like in his prime.'

He brightened as another topic occurred to him and once more quaked with laughter.

'I saw a most attractive young lady when I was out visiting the other day. Fourteen this year. Seeing her put me in mind of our young friend here. It must be about time we started thinking about a match for him, surely? In looks, intelligence, breeding, background this girl was ideally suited. What does Your Old Ladyship feel? I didn't want to rush matters. I thought I'd better first wait and see what Your Old Ladyship thought before saying anything to the family.'

'A monk who once told the boy's fortune said that he was not to marry young,' said Grandmother Jia; 'so I think we had better wait until he is a little older before we arrange anything definite. But do by all means go on inquiring for us. It doesn't matter whether the family is wealthy or not; as long as the girl *looks* all right, you can let me know. Even if it's a poor family, we can always help Out over the expenses. Money is no problem. It's looks and character that count.'

'Now come on, Papa Zhang!' said Xi-feng when this exchange had ended. Where's that new amulet for my little girl? You had the nerve to send someone round the other day for gosling satin, and of course, as we didn't want to embarrass the old man by refusing, we had to send you some. So now what about that amulet ?'

Abbot Zhang once more quaked with laughter.

'Ho! ho! ho I You can tell how bad my eyes are getting; I didn't even see you there, dear lady, or I should have thanked you for the satin. Yes, the amulet has been ready for some time. I was going to send it to you two days ago, but then Her Grace unexpectedly asked us for this *Pro Viventibus* and I stupidly forgot all about it. It's still on the high altar being sanctified. I'll go and get it for you.'

He went off, surprisingly nimbly, to the main hall of the temple and returned after a short while carrying the amulet on a little tea-tray, using a **red** satin book-wrap as a tray-cloth. Baby's nurse took the amulet from him, and he was just about to receive the little girl from her arms when he caught sight of Xi-feng laughing at him mockingly.

'Why didn't you bring it in your hand?' she asked him.

'The hands get so sweaty in this weather,' he said. 'I thought a tray would be more hygienic.'

'You gave me quite a fright when I saw you coming in with that tray,' said Xi-feng. 'I thought for one moment you were going to take up a collection!'

There was a loud burst of laughter from the assembled company. Even Cousin Zhen was unable to restrain himself.

'Monkey! Monkey!' said Grandmother Jia. 'Aren't you afraid of going to the Hell of Scoffers when you die and having your tongue cut out?'

'Oh, Papa and I say what we like to each other,' said Xi-feng. He's always telling *me* I must "acquire merit" and threatening me with a short life if I don't pay up quickly. That's right, isn't it Papa?'

'As a matter of fact I *did* have an ulterior motive in bringing this tray,' said Abbot Zhang, laughing, 'but it wasn't in order to make a collection, I assure you. I wanted to ask this young gentleman here if he would be so very kind as to lend me the famous jade for a few minutes. The tray is for carrying it outside on, so that my Taoist friends, some of whom have travelled long distances to be here, and my old students, and *their* students, all of whom are gathered here today, may have the privilege of examining it.'

'My dear good man, in that case let the boy go with it round his neck and show it to them himself!' said Grandmother Jia. 'No need for all this running to and fro with trays—at your age, too!'

'Most kind! Most considerate!—But Your Old Ladyship is deceived,' said the abbot. 'I may look my eighty years, but I'm still hale and hearty. No, the point is that with so many of them here today and the weather so hot,

the smell is sure to be somewhat overpowering. Our young friend here is certainly not used to it. We shouldn't want him to be overcome by the—ah—effluvia, should we?'

Hearing this, Grandmother Jia told Bao-yu to take off the Magic Jade and put it on the tray. Abbot Zhang draped the **crimson** cloth over his hands, grasped the tray between satin-covered thumbs and fingers, and, holding it like a sacred relic at eye level in front of him, conveyed it reverently from the courtyard.

Grandmother Jia and the others now continued their sightseeing. They had finished with everything at ground level and were about to mount the stairs into the galleries when Cousin Zhen came up to report that Abbot Zhang had returned with the jade. He was followed by the smiling figure of the abbot, holding the tray in the same reverential manner as before.

'Well, they've all seen the jade now,' he said, '—and very grateful they were. They agreed that it really is a most remarkable object, and they regretted that they had nothing of value to show their appreciation with. Here you are!—this is the best they could do. These are all little Taoist trinkets they happened to have about them. Nothing very special, I'm afraid; but they'd like our young friend to keep them, either to amuse himself with or to give away to his friends.'

Grandmother Jia looked at the tray. It was covered with jewellery. There were golden crescents, jade thumb-rings and a lot of 'motto' jewellery—a tiny sceptre and persimmons with the rebus-meaning 'success in all things', a little quail and a vase with corn-stalks meaning 'peace throughout the years', and many other designs—all in gold—or jade—work, and much of it inlaid with pearls and precious stones. Altogether there must have been about forty pieces.

'What have you been up to, you naughty old man?' she said. 'Those men are all poor priests - they can't afford to give things like *this* away. You really shouldn't have done this. We can't possibly accept them.'

'It was their own idea, I do assure you,' said the abbot. 'There was nothing I could do to stop them. If you refuse to take these things, I am afraid you will destroy my credit with these people. They will say that I cannot really have the connection with your honoured family that I have always claimed to have.'

After this Grandmother Jia could no longer decline She told one of the servants to receive the tray.

'We obviously can't refuse, Grannie, after what Papa Zhang has just said,' said Bao-yu; 'but I really have no use for this stuff. Why not let one of the boys carry it outside for me and I'll distribute it to the poor?'

'I think that's a very good idea,' said Grandmother Jia.

But Abbot Zhang thought otherwise and hastily intervened:

'I'm sure it does our young friend credit, this charitable impulse. However. Although these things are, as I said, of no especial value, they are—what shall I say—objects of *virtù*, and if you give them to the poor, in the first place the poor won't have much use for them, and in the second place the objects themselves will get spoiled. If you want to give something to the poor, a largesse of money would, I suggest, be far more appropriate.

'Very well, look after this stuff for me, then,' said Bao-yu to the servant, 'and this evening you will distribute a largesse.'

This being now settled, Abbot Zhang withdrew, and Grandmother Jia and her party went up to the galleries. Grandmother Jia sat with Bao-yu and the girls in the gallery facing the stage and Xi-feng and Li Wan sat in the east gallery. The maids all sat in the west gallery and took it in turns to go off and wait on their mistresses.

Not long after they were all seated, Cousin Zhen came upstairs to say that the gods had now chosen which

plays were to be performed—by which was meant, of course, that the names had been shaken from a pot in front of the altar, since this was the only way in which the will of the gods could be known. The first play selected was *The White Serpent.*

'What's the story?' said Grandmother Jia.

Cousin Zhen explained that it was about the emperor Gao-zu, founder of the Han dynasty, who began his rise to greatness by decapitating a monstrous white snake.

The second choice was A *Heap of Honours,* which shows the sixtieth birthday party of the great Tang general Guo Zi-yi, attended by his seven sons and eight sons-in-law, all of whom held high office, the 'heap of honours' of the title being a reference to the table in his reception-hall piled high with their insignia.

'It seems a bit conceited to have this second one played,' said Grandmother Jia. 'Still, if that's what the gods chose, I suppose we'd better have it. What's the third one going to be?'

'*The South Branch,'* said Cousin Zhen.

Grandmother Jia was silent. She knew that *The South 13ranch* likens the world to an ant-heap and tells a tale of power and glory which turns out in the end to have been a dream.

Hearing no reply, Cousin Zhen went off downstairs again to see about the Offertory Scroll, which had to be ceremonially burnt in front of the holy images along with paper money and paper ingots before the theatrical performance could begin.

Our record omits any description of that ceremony and moves back to Bao-yu, who was sitting in the central gallery beside his grandmother, and who now called for a maid to bring the tray up so that he could put on his Magic Jade again. When he had done so, he began to pick over the other trinkets with which the tray was covered and to hand them one by one to Grandmother Jia for her inspection. Her attention was taken by a little red-gold kylin with kingfisher-feather inlay. She stretched out her hand to take it.

'Now where have I seen something like this before?' she said. 'I feel certain I've seen some girl wearing an ornament like this.'

'Cousin Shi's got one,' said Bao-chai. 'It's the same as this one only a little smaller.'

'Funny!' said Bao-yu. 'All the times she's been to our house, *I* don't remember ever having seen it.'

'Cousin Ban is observant,' said Tan-chun. 'No matter what it is, she remembers everything.'

'Well, perhaps not quite *everything,'* said Dai-yu wryly. 'But she's certainly very observant where things like *this* are concerned.'

Bao-chai turned her head away and pretended not to have heard.

Now that he knew the kylin on the tray was like one that Shi Xiang-yun wore, Bao-yu hurriedly picked it up and thrust it inside his jacket. But no sooner had he done so than it occurred to him that his action might be misconstrued; so instead of dropping it into his inside pocket, he continued to hold it there, at the same time glancing about him furtively to see if he had been observed. None of the others seemed to have noticed except Dai-yu, who was staring at him fixedly and nodding her head in mock approval

Bao-yu felt suddenly embarrassed. Drawing his hand Out again with the ornament still in it, he returned her look and laughed sheepishly:

'It's rather nice, isn't it? I thought I'd keep it for you,' he said. 'When we get home we can thread it on a ribbon and you'll be able to wear it.'

Dai-yu tossed her head.

'I don't want it!'

'If you don't want it, I'll keep it for myself, then,' said Bao-yu, and popped it once more inside his jacket.

He was about to add something, but just at that moment Cousin Zhen's wife, You-shi, and his new daughter-in-law, Hu-shi, arrived and came upstairs to pay their respects to Grandmother Jia.

'Now why have you come here? You really shouldn't have bothered,' said Grandmother Jia. 'We only came to amuse ourselves. It isn't a formal visit.'

No sooner had she said this than it was announced that representatives from General Feng's household had arrived. It appeared that Feng Zi-ying's mother, hearing that the Jia ladies were having a *Pro Viventibus* performed at the Taoist temple, had immediately prepared an offering of pork, mutton, incense, tea and cakes and sent it post-haste to the temple with her compliments. Xi-feng, hearing the announcement, came hurrying round to the central gallery. She clapped her hands and laughed.

'Dear oh dear! This is something I hadn't bargained for. My idea was a quiet little outing for us girls; but here is everyone sending offerings and behaving as if we'd come here for a high mass or something. It's all your fault, Grannie! And we haven't even got any vails ready to give to the beaters.' Even as she said this, two stewardesses from the Feng household were already mounting the stairs. And before *'hey* had gone, other messengers arrived with offerings from Vice-president Zhao's lady. From then on it was a steady stream:

> friends, kinsmen, family connections, business associates - all who had heard that the Jia ladies were holding a *Pro Viventibus* sent their representatives along with offerings and complimentary messages. Grandmother Jia began to regret that she had ever come.

'It isn't as if we'd come here for the ceremony,' she grumbled. 'We only wanted to enjoy ourselves. But all we seem to have done is to have stirred up a lot of fuss.'

Consequently, although she stayed and watched the plays for that day, she returned home fairly early in the afternoon and next day professed herself too lacking in energy to go again. Xi-feng reacted differently. 'In for a penny, in for a pound' was her motto. They had already had the fuss; and since the players were there anyway, they might as well go again today and enjoy themselves in peace.

> For Bao-yu the whole of the previous day had been spoilt by Abbot Zhang's proposal to Grandmother Jia to arrange a match for him. He came home in a thoroughly bad temper and kept telling everyone that he would 'never see Abbot Zhang again as long as he lived'. Not associating his ill-humour with the abbot's proposal, the others were mystified.

Grandmother Jia's unwillingness was further reinforced by the fact that Dai-yu, since her return home yesterday, had been suffering from mild sunstroke. What with one thing and another, the old lady declined absolutely to go again, and Xi-feng had to make up her own party and go by herself.

But Xi-feng's play-going does not concern us.

*

> Bao-yu, believing that Dai-yu's sunstroke was serious and that she might even be in danger of her life, was so worried that he could not eat, and rushed round in the middle of the lunch-hour to see how she was. He found her neither as ill as he had feared nor as responsive as he might have hoped.
>
> 'Why don't you go and watch your plays?' she asked him. 'What are you mooning about at home for?'
>
> Abbot Zhang's recent attempt at match-making had profoundly distressed Bao-yu and he was shocked by her seeming indifference.
>
> 'I can forgive the others for not understanding what has upset me,' he thought; 'but that *she*

should want to trifle with me at a time like this…!

The sense that she had failed him made the annoyance he now felt with her a hundred times greater than it had been on any previous occasion. Never could any other person have stirred him to such depths of atrabilious rage. Coming from other lips, her words would scarcely have touched him. Coming. from hers, they put him in a passion. His face darkened.

'It's all along been a mistake, then,' he said. 'You're not what I took you for.'

Dai-yu gave an unnatural little laugh.

'Not what you took me for? That's hardly surprising, is it? I haven't got that *little something* which would have made me worthy of you.'

Bao-yu came tight up to her and held his face close to hers:

'You do realize, don't you, that you are deliberately willing my death?'

Dai-yu could not for the moment understand what he was talking about.

'I swore an oath to you yesterday,' he went on. 'I said that I hoped Heaven might strike me dead if this "gold and jade" business meant anything to me. Since you have now brought it up again, it's clear to me that you *want* me to die. Though what you hope to gain by my death I find it hard to imagine.'

Dai-yu now remembered what had passed between them on the previous day. She knew that she was wrong to have spoken as she did, and felt both ashamed and a little frightened. Her shoulders started shaking and she began to cry.

'May Heaven strike *me* dead if I ever willed your death!' she said. 'But I don't see what you have to get so worked up about. It's only because of what Abbot Zhang said about arranging a match for you. You're afraid he might interfere with your precious "gold and jade" plans; and because you're angry about that, you have to come along and take it out on me—That's all it is, isn't it?'

Bao-yu had from early childhood manifested a streak of morbid sensibility, which being brought up in close proximity with a nature so closely in harmony with his own had done little to improve. Now that he had reached an age when both his experience and the reading of forbidden books had taught him something about 'worldly matters', he had begun to take a rather more grown-up interest in girls. But although there were plenty of young ladies of outstanding beauty and breeding among the Jia family's numerous acquaintance, none of them, in his view, could remotely compare with Dai-yu. For some time now his feeling for her had been a very special one; but precisely because of this same morbid sensibility, he had shrunk from telling her about it. Instead, whenever he was feeling particularly happy or particularly cross, he would invent all sorts of ways of probing her to find out if this feeling for her was reciprocated. It was unfortunate for him that Dai-yu herself possessed a similar streak of morbid sensibility and disguised her teal feelings, as he did his, while attempting to discover what *he* felt about *her*.

Here was a situation, then, in which both parties concealed their real emotions and assumed counterfeit ones in an endeavour to find out what the real feelings of the other party were. And because when false meets false the truth will oft-times out, there was the constant possibility that the innumerable little frustrations that were engendered by all this concealment would eventually erupt into a quarrel.

Take the present instance. What Bao-yu was actually thinking at this moment was something like this:

In my eyes and in my thoughts there is no one else but you. I can forgive the others for not knowing this, but surely you ought to realize? If at a time like this you can't share my anxiety—if you can think of nothing better to do than provoke me with that sort of silly talk, it shows that the concern I feel for you every waking minute of the day is wasted: that you just don't care about me at all.'

This was what he *thought;* but of course be didn't *say* it. On her side Dai-yu's thoughts were somewhat as follows:

'I know you must care for me a little bit, and I'm sure you don't take this ridiculous "gold and jade" talk seriously. But if you cared *only* for me and had absolutely no inclination at all in another direction, then every time I mentioned "gold and jade" you would behave quite naturally and let it pass almost as if you hadn't noticed. How is it, then, that when I do refer to it you get so excited? It shows that it must be on your mind. You *pretend* to be upset in order to allay my suspicions.'

Meanwhile a quite different thought was running through Bao-yu's mind

'I would do anything—absolutely *anything,'* he was thinking, 'if only you would be nice to me. If you would be nice to me, I would gladly die for you this moment. It doesn't really matter whether you know what I feel for you or not. Just be nice to me, then at least we shall be a little closer to each other, instead of so horribly far apart.'

At the same time Dai-yu was thinking:

'Never mind me. Just be your own natural self. *If yon* were all right, *I* should be all right too. All these manoeuvrings to try and anticipate my feelings don't bring us any closer together; they merely draw us farther apart.'

The percipient reader will no doubt observe that these two young people were already of one mind, but that the complicated procedures by which they sought to draw together were in fact having precisely the opposite effect. Complacent reader! Permit us to remind you that your correct understanding of the situation is due solely to the fact that we have been revealing to you the secret, innermost thoughts of those two young persons, which neither of them had so far ever felt able to express.

Let us now return from the contemplation of inner thoughts to the recording of outward appearances.

When Dai-yu, far from saying something nice to him, once mote made reference to the 'gold and jade', Bao-yu became so choked with rage that for a moment he was quite literally bereft of speech. Frenziedly snatching the 'Magic Jade' from his neck and holding it by the end of its silken cord he gritted his teeth and dashed it against the floor with all the strength in his body.

'Beastly thing!' he shouted. 'I'll smash you to pieces and put an end to this once and for all.'

But the jade, being exceptionally hard and resistant, was not the tiniest bit damaged. Seeing that he had not broken it, Bao-yu began to look around for something to smash it *with*. Dai-yu, still crying, saw what he was going to do.

'Why smash a dumb, lifeless object?' she said. 'If you want to smash something, let it be me.'

The sound of their quarrelling brought Nightingale and Snowgoose hurrying in to keep the peace. They found Bao-yu apparently bent on destroying his jade and tried to wrest it from him. Failing to do so, and sensing that the quarrel was of more than usual dimensions, they went off to fetch Aroma. Aroma came back with them as fast as she could run and eventually succeeded in prising the jade from his hand. He glared at her scornfully.

'It's my own thing I'm smashing,' he said. 'What business is it of yours to interfere?'

Aroma saw that his face was white with anger and his eyes wild and dangerous. Never had she seen him in so terrible a rage. She took him gently by the hand:

'You shouldn't smash the jade just because of a disagreement with your cousin,' she said. 'What do you think she would feel like and what sort of position would it put her in if you really *were* to break it?'

Dai-yu heard these words through her sobs. They struck a responsive chord in her breast, and she wept all the harder to think that even Aroma seemed to understand her better than Bao-yu did. So much emotion was too

much for her weak stomach. Suddenly there was a horrible retching noise and up came the tisane of elsholtzia leaves she had taken only a short while before. Nightingale quickly held out her handkerchief to receive it and, while Snowgoose rubbed and pounded her back, Dai-yu continued to retch up wave upon wave of watery vomit, until the whole handkerchief was soaked with It.

> 'However cross you may be, Miss, you ought to have more regard for your health,' said Nightingale. 'You'd only just taken that medicine and you were beginning to feel a little bit better for it, and now because of your argument with Master Bao you've gone and brought it all up again. Suppose you were to be *really* ill as a consequence. How do you think Master Bao would feel?'

When Bao-yu heard these words they struck a responsive chord in *his* breast, and he reflected bitterly that even Nightingale seemed to understand him better than Dai-yu But then he looked again at Dai-yu, who was sobbing and panting by turns, and whose **red** and swollen face was wet with perspiration and tears, and seeing how pitiably frail and ill she looked, his heart misgave him.

'I shouldn't have taken her up on that "gold and jade" business,' he thought. 'I've got her into this state and now there's no way in which I can relieve her by sharing what she suffers.' As he thought this, he, too, began to cry.

Now that Bao-yu and Dai-yu were both crying, Aroma instinctively drew towards her master to comfort him. A pang of pity for him passed through her and she squeezed his hand sympathetically. It was as cold as ice. She would have liked to tell him not to cry but hesitated, partly from the consideration that he might be suffering from some deep-concealed hurt which crying would do something to relieve, and partly from the fear that to do so in Dai-yu's presence might seem presumptuous. Torn between a desire to speak and fear of the possible consequences of speaking, she did what girls of her type often do when faced with a difficult decision: she avoided the necessity of making one by bursting into tears.

As for Nightingale, who had disposed of the handkerchief of vomited tisane and was now gently fanning her mistress with her fan, seeing the other three all standing there as quiet as mice with the tears streaming down their faces, she was so affected by the sight that she too started crying and was obliged to have recourse to a second handkerchief.

There the four of them stood, then, facing each other; all of them crying; none of them saying a word. It was Aroma who broke the silence with a strained and nervous laugh.

'You ought not to quarrel with Miss Lin,' she said to Bao-yu, 'if only for the sake of this pretty cord she made you.,

At these words Dai-yu, ill as she was, darted forward, grabbed the jade from Aroma's hand, and snatching up a pair of scissors that were lying nearby, began feverishly cutting at its silken cord with them. Before Aroma and Nightingale could stop her, she had already cut it into several pieces.

'It was a waste of time making it,' she sobbed. 'He doesn't really care for it. And there's someone else who'll no doubt make him a better one I'

'What a shame!' said Aroma, retrieving the jade. 'It's all my silly fault. I should have kept my mouth shut.'

'Go on! Cut away!' said Bao-yu. 'I shan't be wearing the wretched thing again anyway, so it doesn't matter.'

Preoccupied with the quarrel, the four of them had failed to notice several old women, who had been drawn by the sound of it to investigate. Apprehensive, when they saw Dai-yu hysterically weeping and vomiting and Bao-yu trying to smash his jade, of the dire consequences to be expected from a scene of such desperate passion, 'they had hurried off in a body to the front of the mansion to report the matter to Grandmother Jia and Lady

Wang, hoping in this way to establish in advance that whatever the consequences might be, *they* were not responsible for them. From their precipitate entry and the grave tone of their announcement Grandmother Jia and Lady Wang assumed that some major catastrophe had befallen and hurried with them into the Garden to find out what it was.

Their arrival filled Aroma with alarm. 'What did Nightingale want to go troubling Their Ladyships for?' she thought crossly, supposing that the talebearer had been sent to them by Nightingale; while Nightingale for her part was angry with Aroma, thinking that the talebearer must have been one of Aroma's minions.

Grandmother Jia and Lady Wang entered the room to find a silent Bao-yu and a silent Dai-yu, neither of whom, when questioned, would admit that anything at all was the matter. They therefore visited their wrath on the beads of the two unfortunate maids, insisting that it was entirely owing to their negligence that matters had got so much Out of hand. Unable to defend themselves, the girls were obliged to endure a long and abusive dressing-down, after which Grandmother Jia concluded the affair by carrying Bao-yu off to her own apartment.

Next day, the third of the fifth month, was Xue Pan's birthday and there was a family party with plays, to which the Jias were all invited. Bao-yu, who had still not seen Dai-yu since his outburst—which he now deeply regretted—was feeling far too dispirited to care about seeing plays, and declined to go on the ground -that he was feeling unwell.

Dai-yu, though somewhat overcome on the day previous to this by the sultry weather, had by no means been seriously ill. Arguing that if *she* was not ill, it was impossible that *he* should be, she felt sure, when she heard of Bao-yu's excuse, that it must be a false one.

'He usually enjoys drinking and watching plays,' she thought. 'If he's not going, it must be because he is still angry about yesterday; or if it-isn't that, it must be because he's heard that I'm not going and doesn't want to go without me. Oh I I should *never* have cut that cord! Now he won't ever wear his jade again - unless I make him another cord to wear it on.'

So she, too, regretted the quarrel.

Grandmother Jia knew that Bao-yu and Dai-yu were angry with each other, but she had been assuming that they would see each other at the Xues' party and make it up there.

When neither of them turned up at it, she became seriously upset.

'I'm a miserable old sinner,' she grumbled. It must be my punishment for something I did wrong in a past life to have to live with a pair of such obstinate, addle-headed little geese! I'm sure there isn't a day goes by without their giving me some fresh cause for anxiety. It must he fate. That's what it says in the proverb, after all:

> 'Tis Fate brings foes and lo'es tegither.
>
> I'll be glad when I've drawn my last breath and closed my old eyes for the last time; then the two of them can snap and snarl at each other to their hearts' content, for *I* shan't be there to see it, and "what the eye doesn't see, the heart doesn't grieve". The Lord knows, it's not my wish to drag on this wearisome life any longer!'

Amidst these muttered grumblings the old lady began to cry.

In due course her words were transmitted to Bao-yu and Dai-yu. It happened that neither of them had ever heard the saying

> 'Tis Fate brings foes and lo'es tegither,

and its impact on them, hearing it for the first time, was like that of a Zen 'perception' something to be meditated on with bowed head and savoured with a gush of tears. Though they

had still not made it up since their quarrel, the difference between them had now vanished completely:

In Naiad's House one to the wind made moan,
In **Green** Delights one to the moon complained,

to parody the well-known lines. Or, in homelier verses:

Though each was in a different place,
Their hearts in friendship beat as one.

On the second day after their quarrel Aroma deemed that the time was now ripe for urging a settlement.

'Whatever the rights and wrongs of all this may be,' she said to Bao-yu, '*you* are certainly the one who is *most* to blame. Whenever in the past you've heard about a quarrel between one of the pages and one of the girls, you've always said that the boy was a brute for not understanding the girl's feelings better—yet here you are behaving in exactly the same way yourself! Tomorrow will be the Double Fifth. Her Old Ladyship will be really angry if the two of you are still at daggers drawn on the day of the festival, and that will make life difficult for all of us. Why not put your pride in your pocket and go and say you are sorry, so that we can all get back to normal again?'

But as to whether or not Bao-yu followed her advice, or, if he did so, what the effect of following it was - those questions will be dealt with in the following chapter.

CHAPTER 30

Bao-chai speaks of a fan and castigates her deriders
Charmante scratches a 'qiang' and mystifies a beholder

Dai-yu, as we have shown, regretted her quarrel with Bao-yu almost as soon as it was over; but since there were no conceivable grounds on which she could run after him and tell him so, she continued, both day and night, in a state of unrelieved depression that made her feel almost as if a part of her was lost. Nightingale had a shrewd idea how it was with her and resolved at last to tackle her:

'I think the day before yesterday you were too hasty, Miss. *We* ought to know what things Master Bao is touchy about, *if* no one else does. Look at all the quarrels we've had with *him* in the past on account of that jade!'

'Poh!' said Dai-yu scornfully. 'You are trying to make Out that it was my fault because you have taken his side against me. Of course I wasn't too hasty.'

Nightingale gave her a quizzical smile.

'No? Then why did you cut that cord up ? If three parts of the blame was Bao-yu's, I'm sure at least seven parts of it was yours. From what I've seen of it, he's all right with you when you allow him to be; it's because you're so prickly with him and always trying to put him in the wrong that he gets worked up.'

Dai-yu was about to retort when they heard someone at the courtyard gate calling to be let in. Nightingale turned to listen:

'That's Bao-yu's voice,' she said. 'I expect he has come to apologize.'

'I forbid you to let him in,' said Dai-yu.

‘There you go again!’ said Nightingale. ‘You’re going to keep him standing outside in the blazing sun on a day like this. Surely that’s wrong, if nothing else is?’

She was moving outside, even as she said this, regardless of her mistress s injunction. Sure enough, it *was* Bao-yu. She unfastened the gate and welcomed him in with a friendly smile.

‘Master Bao! I was beginning to think you weren’t coming to see us any more, I certainly didn’t expect to see you here again so soon.

‘Oh, you’ve been making a mountain out of a molehill,’ said Bao-yu, returning her smile. ‘Why ever shouldn’t I come? Even if I died, my *ghost* would be round here a hundred times a day. How is my cousin? Quite better now?’

‘Physically she’s better,’ said Nightingale, ‘but she’s still in very poor spirits.’

‘Ah yes—I know she’s upset.’

This exchange took place as they were crossing the forecourt. He now entered the room. Dai-yu was sitting on the bed crying. She bad not been crying to start with, but the bittersweet pang she experienced when she heard his arrival had started the tears rolling. Bao-yu went up to the bed and smiled down at her.

‘How are you, coz? Quite better now ?’

As Dai-yu seemed to be too busy wiping her eyes to make a reply, he sat down close beside her on the edge of the bed:

‘I know you’re not *really* angry with me,’ he said. ‘It’s just that if the others noticed I wasn’t coming here, they would think we had been quarrelling; and if we waited for them to interfere, we should be allowing other people to come between us. It would be better to hit me and shout at me now and get it over with, if you still bear any hard feelings, than to go on ignoring me. Coz dear! Coz dear! -’

He must have repeated those same two words in the same tone of passionate entreaty upwards of twenty times. Dai-yu had been meaning to ignore him, but what he had just been saying about other people ‘coming between’ them seemed to prove that he must in *some* way feel closer to her than the rest, and she was unable to maintain her silence.

‘You don’t have to treat me like a child,’ she blurted out tearfully. ‘From now on I shall make no further claims on you. You can behave exactly as if I had gone away.’

‘Gone away?’ said Bao-yu laughingly. ‘Where would you go to?’

‘Back home.’

‘I’d follow you.’

‘As if I were dead then.’

‘If you died,’ he said, ‘I should become a monk.’

Dai-yu’s face darkened immediately:

‘What an utterly idiotic thing to say! Suppose your own sisters were to die? Just how many times can one person become a monk? I think I had better see what the others think about that remark.’

Bao-yu had realized at once that she would be offended; but the words were already out of his mouth before he could stop them. He turned very **red** and hung his head in silence. It was a good thing that no one else was in the room at that moment to see him. Dai-yu glared at him for some seconds - evidently too enraged to speak, for she made a sound somewhere between a snort and a sigh, but said nothing - then, seeing him almost **purple** in the face with suppressed emotion, she clenched her teeth, pointed her finger at him, and, with an indignant ‘Hmn!’, stabbed the air quite savagely a few inches away from his forehead:

‘You—!’

But whatever it was she had been going to call him never got said. She merely gave a sigh and began wiping her eyes again with her handkerchief.

Bao-yu had been in a highly emotional state when he came to see Dai-yu and it had further upset him to have inadvertently offended her so soon after his arrival. This angry gesture and the unsuccessful struggle, ending in sighs and tears, to say what she wanted to say now affected him so deeply that he, too, began to weep. In need of a handkerchief but finding that he had come out without one, he wiped his eyes on his sleeve.

Although Dai-yu was crying, the spectacle of Bao-yu using the sleeve of his brand-new lilac-coloured summer gown as a handkerchief had not escaped her, and while continuing to wipe her own eyes with one hand, she leaned over and reached with the other for the square of silk that was draped over the head-rest at the end of the bed. She lifted it off and threw it at him—all without uttering a word - then, once more burying her face in her own handkerchief, resumed her weeping. Bao-yu picked up the handkerchief she had thrown him and hurriedly wiped his eyes with it. When he had dried them, he drew up close to her again and took one of her hands in his own, smiling at her gently.

'I don't know why you go on crying,' he said. 'I feel as if all my insides were shattered. Come! Let's go and see Grand mother together.'

Dai-yu flung off his hand.

'Take your hands off me! We're not children any more. You really can't go on mauling me about like this all the time. Don't you understand *anything—?*'

'Bravo!'

The shouted interruption startled them both. They spun round to look just as Xi-feng, full of smiles, came bustling into the room.

'Grandmother has been grumbling away something *awful'* she said. 'She insisted that I should come over and see if you were both all right. "Oh," I said, "there's no need to go and look, Grannie; they'll have made it up by now without any interference from *us."* So she told me I was lazy. Well, here I am—and of course it's exactly as I said it would be. *I* don't know. I don't understand you two. What is it you find to argue about? For every three days that you're friends you must spend at least two days quarrelling. You really are a couple of babies. And the older you get, the worse you get. Look at you *now*—holding hands crying! And a couple of days ago you were glaring at each other like fighting-cocks. Come on! Come with me to see Grandmother. Let's put the old lady's mind at rest.'

As she said this, she seized Dai-yu's hand and began marching off with her. Dai-yu turned back and called for her maids, but there was no response.

'What do you want to call *them* for?' said Xi-feng. 'You've got *me* to wait on you, haven't you?'

She continued to walk away, still holding Dai-yu by the hand. Bao-yu followed a little way behind. They went out of the Garden and through into Grandmother Jia's apartment.

'I *told* you they could be left to themselves to make it up and that there was no need for you to worry,' said Xi-feng to Grandmother Jia. when they were all in the old lady's presence; 'but you wouldn't believe me, would you? You insisted on my going there to act the peacemaker. Well, I went there; and what did I find? I found the two of them together *apologizing* to each other. It was like the kite and the kestrel holding hands: they were positively *locked in a clinch!* No need of a peacemaker that *I* could see.'

There was a burst of laughter from all present. Bao-chai was among these, but Dai-yu slipped past her without speaking and took a seat next to Grandmother Jia. Bao-yu, rather at a loss for something to say, turned to Bao-chai.

‘I’m afraid I’ wasn’t very well on your brother’s birthday; so apart from not giving him a present, I couldn’t even make him a kotow this year. I’m afraid he may not have realized I was ill and thought that I was merely making excuses. If you can spare a moment next time you see him, I do hope you will explain to him for me.’

Bao-chai looked amused.

‘That seems a trifle excessive. I am sure he would have felt uncomfortable about your kotowing to him, even if you had been able to come; so I’m quite sure he wouldn’t have wanted you to come when you weren’t feeling well. It would be rather unfriendly, surely, if cousins who see each other all the time were to start worrying about trifles like *that?’*

Bao-yu smiled.

‘Well, as long as yon understand, that’s all right But why aren’t you watching the players?’

‘I can’t stand the heat,’ said Bao-chai. ‘I did watch a couple of acts of something, but it was so hot that I couldn’t stay any longer. Unfortunately none of the guests showed any sign of going, so I had to pretend I was ill in order to get away.’

‘Touché!’ thought Bao-yu; but he hid his embarrassment in a stupid laugh.

‘No wonder they compare you to Yang Gui-fei, cousin. You are well-covered like her, and they always say that plump people fear the heat.’

The colour flew into Bao-chai’s face. An angry retort was on her lips, but she could hardly make it in front of company. Yet reflection only made her angrier. Eventually, after a scornful sniff or two, she said:

‘I may be like Yang Gui-fei in some respects, but I don’t think there is much danger of my cousin becoming a Prime Minister.’

It happened that just at that moment a very young maid called ‘Prettikins’ jokingly accused Bao-chai of having hidden a fan she was looking for.

‘I *know* Miss Bao’s hidden it,’ she said, ‘Come on, Miss! *Please* let me have it,’

‘You be careful,’ said Bao-chai, pointing at the girl angrily and speaking with unwonted stridency. ‘When did you last see *me* playing games of this sort with anyone? If there are other young ladies who are in the habit of *romping about* with you, you had better ask *them.’*

Prettikins fled.

Bao-yu realized that he had once again given offence by speaking thoughtlessly; and as this time it was in front of a lot of people, his embarrassment was correspondingly greater. He turned aside in confusion and began talking nervously to someone else.

Bao-yu’s rudeness to Bao-chai had given Dai-yu secret satisfaction. When Prettikins came in looking for her fan, she had been on the point of adding some facetiousness of her own at Bao-chai’s expense; but Bao-chai’s brief explosion caused her to drop the prepared witticism and ask instead what play the two acts were from that Bao-chai said she had just been watching.

Bao-chai had observed the smirk on Dai-yu’s face and knew very well that Bao-yu’s rudeness must have pleased her. The smiling answer she gave to Dai-yu’s question was therefore not without a touch of malice.

‘The play I saw was Li Kui Abuses Song Jiang and Afterwards Has to Say He Is Sorry.’

Bao-yu laughed.

‘What a mouthful Surely, with all your learning, cousin, you must know the proper name of that play? It’s called *The Abject Apology.’*

‘The Abject Apology?’ said Bao-chai. ‘Well, no doubt you clever people know all there is to know about abject apology. I’m afraid it’s something I wouldn’t know about.’

Her words touched Bao-yu and Dai-yu on a sensitive spot, and by the time she had finished, they were both blushing hotly with embarrassment.

Xi-feng was insufficiently educated to have understood all these nuances, but by studying the speakers' expressions she had formed a pretty good idea of what they were talking about.

'Rather hot weather to be eating raw ginger, isn't it?' she asked.

No one present could understand what she meant.

'No one's been eating raw ginger,' they said.

Xi-feng affected great surprise and rubbed her cheek meaningfully with her hand:

'If no one's been eating raw ginger, then why are they looking so hot and bothered?'

At this Bao-yu and Dai-yu felt even more uncomfortable. Bao-chai was about to add something, but seeing the abject look on Bao-yu's face, she laughed and held her tongue. None of the others present had understood what the four of them were talking about and treated these exchanges as a joke.

Shortly after this, when Bao-chai and Xi-feng had gone Out of the room, Dai-yu said to Bao-yu.

'You see? There are people even more dangerous to trifle with than I. If I weren't such a tongue-tied, slow-witted creature, you wouldn't get away with it quite so often, my friend.'

Bao-yu was still smarting from Bao-chai's testiness. To be set upon now by Dai-yu as well seemed positively the last straw. But though he wanted to reply, he knew how easily she would take offence and controlled himself with an effort. Feeling in very low spirits, he left the room himself now and went off on his own.

It was the hottest part of the day. Lunch had long been over, and in every apartment mistress and maids alike had succumbed to the lassitude of the hour. As he sauntered slowly by, hands clasped behind his back, everywhere he went was hushed in the breathless silence of noon. From the back of Grandmother Jia's quartets he passed eastwards through the gallery that ended near the wall of Xi-feng's courtyard. He went up to the gate, but it was closed, and remembering that it was her invariable custom when the weather was hot to take two whole hours off in the middle of the day for her siesta, he thought he had better not go in. He continued, instead, through the corner gate that led into his parents' courtyard.

On entering his mother's apartment, he found several maids dozing over their embroidery. Lady Wang herself was lying on a summer-bed in the inner room, apparently fast asleep. Her maid Golden, who was sitting beside her gently pounding her legs, also seemed half asleep, for her head was nodding and her half-closed eyes were blinking drowsily. Bao-yu tiptoed up to her and tweaked an ear-ring. She opened her eyes wide and saw that it was Bao-yu.

He smiled at her and whispered.

'So sleepy?'

Golden pursed her lips up in a smile, motioned to him with her hand to go away, and then closed her eyes again. But Bao-yu lingered, fascinated. Silently craning forward to make sure that Lady Wang's eyes were closed, he took a Fragrant Snow 'quencher' from the embroidered pouch at his waist and popped it between Golden's lips. Golden nibbled it dreamily without opening her eyes.

'Shall I ask Her Ladyship to let me have you, so that we can be together?' he whispered jokingly.

Golden made no reply.

'When she wakes up, I'll talk to her about it,' he said.

Golden opened her eyes wide and gave him a little push.

‘What’s the hurry?’ she said playfully. ‘“Yours is yours, wherever it be”, as they said to the lady when she dropped her gold comb in the well. Haven’t you ever heard that saying?—I’ll tell you something to do, if you want a bit of fun. Go into the little east courtyard and you’ll be able to catch Sunset and Huan together.’

‘Who cares about *them?’* said Bao-yu. ‘Let’s talk about *us.’* At this point Lady Wang sat bolt upright and dealt Golden a slap in the face.

‘Shameless little harlot!’ she cried, pointing at bet wrath-fully. ‘It’s you and your like who corrupt our innocent young boys.’

Bao-yu had slipped silently away as soon as his mother sat up. Golden, one of whose cheeks was now burning a fiery **red,** was left without a word to say. The other maids, hearing that their mistress was awake, came hurrying into the room.

‘Silver!’ said Lady Wang. ‘Go and fetch your mother. I want her to take your sister Golden away.’

Golden threw herself, weeping, upon her knees:

‘No, Your Ladyship, please! Beat me and revile me as much as you like, but please, for pity’s sake, don’t send me away. I’ve been with Your Ladyship nigh on ten years now. How can I ever hold up my head again if you dismiss me?’

Lady Wang was not naturally unkind. On the contrary, she was an exceptionally lenient mistress. This was, in fact, the first time in her life that she had ever struck a maid. But the kind of ‘shamelessness’ of which—in her view - Golden had just been guilty was the one thing she had always most abhorred. It was the uncontrollable anger of the morally Outraged that had caused her to strike Golden and call her names; and though Golden now begged and pleaded, she refused to retract her dismissal. When Golden’s mother, old Mrs Bai, had eventually been fetched, the wretched girl, utterly crushed by her shame and humiliation, was led away.

But of bet no more.

*

Embarrassed by his mother’s awakening, Bao-yu had slipped hurriedly into the Garden.

The burning sun was now in the height of heaven, the contracted shadows were concentrated darkly beneath the trees, and the stillness of noon, filled with the harsh trilling of cicadas, was broken by no human voice; but as he approached the bamboo trellises of the rose-garden, a sound like a sup-pressed sob seemed to come from inside the pergola. Uncertain what it was that he had heard, he stopped to listen. Undoubtedly there was someone there.

This was the fifth month of the year, when the rambler roses are in fullest bloom. Peeping through the fragrant panicles with which the pergola was smothered, he saw a girl crouching down on the other side of the trellis, scratching at the ground with one of those long, blunt pins that girls use for fastening their back hair with.

Can this be some silly maid come here to bury flowers like Frowner?’ he wondered.

He was reminded of Zhuang-zi’s story of the beautiful Xi-shi’s ugly neighbour, whose endeavours to imitate the little frown that made Xi-shi captivating produced an aspect so hideous that people ran from her in terror. The recollection of it made him smile.

‘This is “imitating the Frowner” with a vengeance,’ he thought, ‘- if that is really what she is doing. Not merely unoriginal, but downright disgusting!”

‘Don’t imitate Miss Lin,’ he was about to shout; but a glimpse of the girl’s face revealed to him just in time that this was no maid, but one of the twelve little actresses from Pear-tree Court –though which of them, since he

had seen them only in their make-up on the stage, he was unable to make Out. He stuck Out his tongue in a grimace and clapped a hand to his mouth.

'Good job I didn't speak too soon,' he thought. 'I've been in trouble twice already today for doing that, once with Frowner and once with Chai. It only needs me to go and upset these twelve actresses as well and I shall be well and truly in the cart!'

His efforts to identify the girl made him study her more closely. It was curious that he should have thought her an imitator of Dai-yu, for she had much of Dai-yu's ethereal grace in her looks: the same delicate face and frail, slender body; the same

... brows like hills in spring,
And eyes like autumn's limpid pools;

—even the same little frown that had often made him compare Dai-yu with Xi-shi of the legend.

It was now quite impossible for him to tear himself away. He watched her fascinated. As he watched, he began to see that what she was doing with the pin was not scratching a hole to bury flowers in, but writing. He followed the movements of her hand, and each vertical and horizontal stroke, each dot and hook that she made he copied with a finger on the palm of his hand. Altogether there were eighteen strokes. He thought for a moment. The character he had just written in his hand was QIANG. The name of the roses which covered the pergola contained the same character: 'Qiang-wei'.

'The sight of the roses has inspired her to write a poem,' he thought. 'Probably she's just thought of a good couplet and wants to write it down before she forgets it; or perhaps she has already composed several lines and wants to work on them a bit. Let's see what she writes next.'

The girl went on writing, and he followed the movements of her hand as before. It was another QIANG. Again she wrote, and again he followed, and again it was a QIANG. It was as though she were under some sort of spell. As soon as she had finished writing one QIANG she began writing another.

QIANG QIANG QIANG QIANG QIANG QIANG QIANG…

He must have watched her write several dozen QIANG's in succession. He seemed to be as much affected by the spell on his side of the pergola as the girl herself was on hers, for his eyeballs continued to follow her pin long after he bad learned to anticipate its movements.

'This girl must have something on her mind that she cannot tell anyone about to make her behave in this way,' he thought. 'One can see from her outward behaviour how much she must be suffering inwardly. And she looks so frail. Too frail for suffering. I wish I could bear some of it for you, my dear!'

In the stifling dog-days of summer the transition from clear to overcast is often sudden, and a little cloudlet can sometimes be the harbinger of a heavy shower. As Bao-yu watched the girl, a sudden gust of cool wind blew by, followed, within moments, by the hissing downpour of rain. He could see the water running off her head in streams and soaking into her clothes.

Oh, it's raining! With her delicate constitution she ought not to be outside in a downpour like this.'

In his anxiety he cried out to her involuntarily:

'Don't write any more. Look! You're getting soaked.'

The girl looked up, startled, when she heard the voice. She could see someone amidst the roses saying

‘Don’t write’; but partly because of Bao-yu’s almost girlishly beautiful features, and partly because she could in any case only see about half of his face, everything above and below being hidden by flowers and foliage, she took him for a maid; so instead of rushing from his presence as she would have done if she had known that it was Bao-yu, she smiled up at him gratefully:

‘Thank you for reminding me. But what about you? You must be getting wet too, surely ?’

‘Aiyo!’—her words made him suddenly aware that the whole of his body was icy cold, and when he looked down, he saw that he was soaked.

‘Oh lord!’

He rushed off in the direction of **Green** Delights; but all the time he was worrying about the girl, who had nowhere where she could shelter from the rain.

*

As this was the day before the Double Fifth festival, Élégante and the other little actresses—including the one whom Bao-yu had just been watching - had already started their holiday and had gone into the Garden to amuse themselves. Two of them, Trésor—one of the two members of the company who played Principal Boy parts—and Topaze—one of the company’s two soubrettes—happened to be in the House of **Green** Delights playing with Aroma when the rain started and prevented their leaving. They and the maids amused themselves by blocking up the gutters and letting the water collect in the courtyard. When it was nicely flooded, they rounded up a number of mallards, sheldrakes, mandarin ducks and other waterfowl, tied their wings together, and having first closed die courtyard gate, set them down in the water to swim about. Aroma and the girls were all in the outside gallery enjoying this spectacle when Bao-yu arrived at the gate. Finding it shut, he knocked on it for someone to come and open up for him. But there was little chance of a knock being heard above the excited laughter of the maids. He had to shout for some minutes and pound the gate till it shook before anyone heard him inside.

Aroma was not expecting him back so soon.

‘I wonder who it can be at this time,’ she said. ‘Won’t someone go and answer it?’

‘It’s *me!’* shouted Bao-yu.

‘That’s Miss Bao’s voice,’ said Musk.

‘Nonsense!’ said Skybright. ‘What would *she* be doing visiting us at this time of day?’

‘Let me just take a peep through the crack,’ said Aroma. ‘If I think it’s all right, I’ll let them in. We don’t want to turn any-one away in the pouring rain.’

Keeping under cover of the gallery, she made her way round to the gate and peered through the chink between the double doors. The sight of Bao-yu standing there like a bedraggled hen with the water running off him in streamlets was both alarming and—she could not help but feel very funny. She opened the gate as quickly as she could, then, when she saw him fully, clapped her hands and doubled up with laughter.

‘Master Bao! I *never* thought it would be you. What did you want to come running back in the pouring rain for?’

Bao-yu was by now in a thoroughly evil temper and had fully resolved to give whoever opened the gate a few kicks. As soon as it was open, therefore, he lashed out with his foot, not bothering to see who it was—for he assumed that the person answering it would be one of the younger maids—and dealt Aroma a mighty kick in the

ribs that caused her to cry out in pain.

Worthless lot!' he shouted. Because I always treat you decently, you think you can get away with *anything*. I'm just your laughing-stock.'

It was not until he looked down and saw Aroma crying that he realized he had kicked the wrong person.

'Aiyo! It's you! Where did I kick you?'

Up to this moment Aroma had never had so much as a harsh word from Bao-yu, and the combination of shame, anger and pain she now felt on being kicked and shouted at by him in front of so many people was well-nigh insupportable. Nevertheless she forced herself to bear it, reflecting that to have made an outcry would be like admitting that it was *her* he had meant to kick, which she knew was almost certainly not the case.

'You didn't; you missed me,' she said. 'Come in and get changed.'

When Bao-yu had gone indoors and was changing his clothes, he said to her jokingly:

'In all these years this is the first time I've ever struck anyone in anger. Too bad *that yon* should have been the one to get in the way of the blow!'

In spite of the pain, which it cost her some effort to master, Aroma was helping him with his changing. She smiled when he said this.

'I'm the person you always begin things with,' she said. 'Whether it's big things or little things or pleasant ones or unpleasant ones, it's only natural that you should try them out first on me. Only in this instance I hope that now you've hit me you won't from now on go around hitting other people.'

'I didn't mean to kick you, you know,' said Bao-yu.

'Who said you did?' said Aroma. 'It's the younger ones who normally see to the gate; and they've grown so :insolent nowadays, it's enough to put *anyone* in a rage. If you'd given one of *them* a few kicks and put the fear of God into them, it would have been a very good thing. No, it was my own silly fault. I should have made *them* open the gate and not gone to open it myself.'

While they were speaking, the rain had stopped and Tresor and Topaze had left. The pain in Aroma's side was such that it was giving her a feeling of nausea and she could eat no dinner. At bedtime, when she took off her clothes, she saw a great black bruise the size of a rice-bowl spreading over the side of her chest. The extent of it frightened her, but she forbore to cry out, Nevertheless even her dreams that night were full of pain and she several times uttered an 'Aiyo' in the midst of her sleep.

Although it was understood that he had not kicked her deliberately, Bao-yu had felt a little uneasy when he saw how sluggish Aroma seemed in her movements; and when, during the night, he heard her groaning in her sleep, he knew that he must have kicked her really hard. Getting out of bed, he picked up a lamp and tiptoed over to have a look. Just as he reached the foot of her bed, he heard her cough a couple of times and spit out a mouthful of something.

'Aiyo!'

She opened her eyes wide and saw Bao-yu. Startled, she asked him what he was doing there.

'You've been groaning in your sleep,' he said. 'I must have hurt you badly. Let me have a look.'

'My head feels giddy,' said Aroma, 'and I've got a sweet, sickly taste in my throat. Have a look on the floor.'

Bao-yu shone his lamp on the floor. Beside the bed, where she had spat, there was a mouthful of bright **red** blood. He was horrified.

'Oh, help!'

Aroma looked too, and felt the grip of fear on her heart.

The outcome will he told in the following chapter.

CHAPTER 31

A torn fan is the price of silver laughter
And a lost kylin is the clue to a happy marriage

A cold feat came over Aroma when she saw the fresh blood on the floor. She had often heard people say that if you spat blood when you were young, you would die early, or at the very least be an invalid all your life; and remembering this now, she felt all her bright, ambitious hopes for the future turn into dust and ashes. Tears of misery ran down her cheeks. The sight of them made Bao-yu, too, distressed.

'what is it?' he asked her.

'It's nothing.' She forced herself to smile. 'I'm all right.'

Bao-yu was all for calling one of the maids and getting her to heat some rice wine, so that Aroma could be given hot wine and Hainan kid's-blood pills; but Aroma, smiling through her tears, caught at his hand to restrain him.

'It's all right for you to make a fuss,' she said; 'but if you go involving the others, they are sure to accuse me of putting on airs. And besides, it will do neither of us any good to draw attention to ourselves—especially when so far no one seems to have noticed anything. The sensible thing would be for you to send one of the boys round tomorrow to Dr Wang's and get me some medicine to take. I shall probably be all right again after a few doses, without a single soul knowing any-thing about it. Surely that's best, isn't it?'

Bao-yu knew that she was right and abandoned his intention of rousing the others. Instead he poured her a cup of tea from a pot on the table and gave it to her to rinse her mouth with. Aroma was uneasy about being waited on by her master; but fearing that if she refused his services he would insist on disturbing everybody, she lay back and allowed him to fuss over her.

As soon as it was daylight, Bao-yu threw on his clothes and, without even waiting to wash or comb, went out of the Garden to his study in the front part of the mansion, whither he summoned the doctor Wang Ji-ren for detailed questioning. When this worthy had elicited the information that the haemorrhage inquired about had been caused by a blow, he seemed less disposed to take a serious view of the case, merely naming some pills and giving perfunctory instructions for taking them internally and for applying them in solution as a poultice. Bao-yu made a note of these instructions and went back into the Garden to carry them Out.

But that is no part of our story.

*

It was now the festival of the Double Fifth. Sprays of calamus and artemisia crowned the doorways and everyone wore tiger amulets fastened on their clothing at the back. At noon Lady Wang gave a little party at which Aunt Xue and Bao-chai were the guests.

Bao-yu, finding Bao-chai somewhat glacial in her manner and evidently unwilling to talk to him, knew that it must be because of his rudeness to her of the day before.

Lady Wang, observing Bao-yu's dejected appearance, attributed it to embarrassment about yesterday's

episode with Golden and ignored him even more pointedly than Bao-chai.

Dai-yu, seeing how morose Bao-yu looked assumed that it was because Bao-chai was offended with him and, feeling resentful that he should care, at once became as morose as he was.

Xi-feng, having been told all about Bao-yu and Golden the night before by Lady Wang, could scarcely be her usual laugh mg and joking self when she knew of her aunt's displeasure and, taking her cue from the latter, was if anything even more glacial than the others.

And Ying-chun, Tan-chun and Xi-chun, seeing everyone else so uncomfortable, soon began to feel just as uncomfortable themselves.

The result was that after sitting for only a very short time, the party broke up.

Dai-yu had a natural aversion to gatherings, which she rationalized by saying that since the inevitable consequence of getting together was parting, and since parting made people feel lonely and feeling lonely made them unhappy, *ergo* it was better for them not to get together in the first place. In the same way she argued that since the flowers, which give us so much pleasure when they open, only cause us a lot of extra sadness when they die, it would be better if they didn't come out at all.

Bao-yu was just the opposite. He always wanted the party to go on for ever and flowers to be in perpetual bloom; and when at last the party did end and the flowers did wither well, it was infinitely sad and distressing, but it couldn't be helped.

And so today, while everyone else left the party with feelings of gloom, Dai-yu alone was completely unaffected. Bao-yu, on the other hand, returned to his room in a mood of black despondency, sighing and muttering as he went.

Unfortunately it was the sharp-tongued Skybright who came forward to help him change his clothes. With provoking carelessness she dropped a fan while she was doing so and snapped the bone fan-sticks by accidentally treading on it.

'Clumsy!' said Bao-yu reproachfully. 'You won't be so careless with things when you have a household of your own.'

Skybright gave a sardonic sniff.

'You're getting quite a temper lately, Master Bao. Almost every time we move nowadays we get a nasty look from you. Yesterday even Aroma caught it. Today you're finding fault with me, so I suppose I can expect a few kicks too. Well, kick away. But I must say, I shouldn't have thought treading on a *fan* was such a very terrible thing to do. In the past any number of glass bowls and agate cups have got broken without your turning a hair. Why this fuss about a fan, then? If you're not satisfied with my service, you ought to dismiss me and get someone better. Easy come, easy go. No need for beating about the bush.'

By the time she had finished, Bao-yu was so angry that he was shaking all over.

'You'll *go* soon enough, don't you worry 1' he said.

Aroma had heard all this from the adjoining room and now came hurrying in.

'Now what's all this about?' she said, addressing herself to Bao-yu. 'Didn't I tell you? As soon as I turn my back there's trouble.'

'If you knew that already,' said Skybright, 'it's a pity you couldn't have come in a bit sooner and saved me from provoking him. Of course, we all know that you're the only one who knows how to serve him properly. None of the rest of us knows how it's done. I suppose it's because you serve him so well that he gave you a kick in the ribs yesterday. Heaven knows what he's got in store for *me* for having served him so badly!'

Angry, and at the same time ashamed, Aroma was about to retort; but the sight of Bao-yu's face, now white

with anger, made her restrain herself.

'Be a good girl just go away and play for a bit. It's *we* who are in the wrong.'

Skybright naturally assumed that 'we' meant Aroma and Bao-yu. Her jealousy was further inflamed.

'What do you mean, "we"?' she said, 'You two make me feel ashamed for you, you really do —because you needn't think you deceive me. *I* know what goes on between you when you think no one is looking. But when all's said and done, in actual fact, when you come down to it, you're not even a "Miss" by *rights.* By *rights* you're no better than any of the rest of us. I don't know where you get this "we" from.'

Aroma blushed and blushed with shame, until her face had become a dusky **red** colour. Too late she realized her slip. By 'we' she had meant no more than 'you and I'; not 'Bao-yu and I' as Skybright imagined. But the pronoun had invited misunderstanding.

It was Bao-yu who retorted, however.

'I'll make her a "Miss" then; I'll make her my chamber-wife tomorrow, if that's all that's worrying you. You can spare your jealousy on *that* account.'

Aroma seized his hand impulsively.

'Don't argue with her, she's only a silly girl. In any case, you've put up with much worse than this in the past; why be so touchy today?'

Skybright gave a harsh little laugh.

'Oh, yes. I'm too stupid to talk to. I'm only a slave.'

'Are you arguing with me, Miss, or with Master Bao?' said Aroma. 'If it's me you've got it in for, you'd better address your remarks to me elsewhere. There's no cause to go quarrelling with me in front of Master Bao. But if it's Master Bao you want to quarrel with, then at least you might do it a bit more quietly and not let everyone else know about it. When I came in just now, it was for everyone's sake, so that we could have a bit of peace and quiet. I don't know why you had to turn on *me* and start picking on my shortcomings. It seems as if you can't make up your mind whether you're angry with me or with Master Bao. Slipping in a dig here and a dig there. I don't know what you think you're up to. Anyway, I shan't say any more; I'll just leave you here to get on with it.'

She walked out.

'There's no need for you to be so angry,' Bao-yu said to Skybright. 'I can guess what it is that's bothering you. I shall go and tell Her Ladyship that you're old enough to leave us now and ask her to send you away. That's what you really want, isn't it?'

'I don't want to go away. Why should I want to go away?' said Skybright with tears in her eyes now more upset than ever, 'You're inventing this as a means of getting rid of me, aren't you, because I'm in your way? But you won't get away with it.'

'Look, I've never had to put up with scenes like *this* before,' said Bao-yu. 'What other reason *can* there be but that you want to leave? I really think I *had* better go and see Her Ladyship about this.'

He got up and began to go; but Aroma came in again and barred his way.

'Where are you off to?' she asked him smilingly.

'To see Her Ladyship.'

'Oh, that's silly,' said Aroma. 'I wonder you're not ashamed to. Even if Skybright really does want to leave, there will be plenty of time to tell Her Ladyship about it when everyone has cooled down a bit and you are feeling calm and collected. If you go rushing off in your present state, Her Ladyship will suspect something.'

'Her Ladyship won't suspect anything,' said Bao-yu. 'I shall tell her quite openly that Skybright has been

agitating to leave.'

'When have I ever agitated to leave?' said Skybright, weeping now in earnest. 'Even if you're angry with me, you ought not to twist things round in order to get the better of me. But you go and tell her! I don't care if I have to beat my own brains out, I'm not going out of that door.'

'Now that's really strange,' said Bao-yu. 'You don't want to go, yet at the same time you won't keep quiet. It's no good; I really can't stand this quarrelling. I shall really *hare* to see Her Ladyship about this and get it over with.'

This time he seemed quite determined to go.

Seeing that she was unable to hold him back, Aroma went down on her knees. Emerald, Ripple, Musk and the other maids, aware that a quarrel of more than usual magnitude was going on inside, were waiting together outside in breathless silence. when word reached them that Aroma was now on her knees interceding for Skybright, they came silently trooping in to kneel down behind her. Bao-yu raised Aroma to her feet, sighed, sat down on the edge of the bed, and told the other maids to get up.

'What do you want me to do?' be asked Aroma. 'My heart is destroyed inside me, but none of you knows Or cares.'

Tears started from his eyes and rolled down his cheeks unheeded. Seeing his tears, Aroma too began to cry. Skybright, who stood crying beside them, was about to say something; but just at that moment Dai-yu walked in and she slipped outside.

Dai-yu beamed at the weeping pair:

'Crying on a holiday? what's all this about? Have you been quarrelling over the rice-cakes?'

Bao-yu and Aroma both burst Out laughing.

'Well, if Cousin Bao won't tell me,' she went on, '1'm sure that *you* will. Come!' she said, slapping Aroma familiarly on the shoulder. 'Tell sis all about it. It's obvious that the two of you have been having an argument. Tell me what it's all about and I'll make it up between you.'

'Oh, Miss!' Aroma gave her a push. 'Don't carry on so! I'm only a maid; you shouldn't say such things to me.'

'Only a maid?' said Dai-yu. I always think of you as my sister-in-law.'

'Don't you see that you're simply *encouraging* people to be nasty to her ?' Bao-yu protested. 'Even as it is, people already gossip about her. How can she stand up to them *if you* come along and lend your weight to what they are saying?'

'You don't know what I feel, Miss,' said Aroma. 'If I only knew how to stop breathing, I'd gladly die.'

Dai-yu smiled.

'If you were to die, I don't know about anyone else, but I know that *I* should die of grief.'

'I should become a monk,' said Bao-yu.

'Try to be a bit more serious,' said Aroma. 'You and Miss Lin are both laughing at me.'

Dai-yu held up two fingers and looked at Bao-yu with a quizzical expression.

'That's twice you're going to become a monk. From now on I'm keeping the score.'

Bao-yu recognized the allusion to what he had said to her the day before. Fortunately he was able to pass it off with a laugh. Shortly after that, Dai-yu left them.

No sooner had Dai-yu gone than someone arrived with an invitation from Xue Pan. Bao-yu thought that this time he had better go. It turned out to be only a drinking-party, but Xue Pan refused to release him and kept him there until it was over. He returned home in the evening more than a little drunk.

As he came lurching into his courtyard, he saw that someone in quest of coolness had taken a bed outside and was lying down on it asleep. Assuming that it must be Aroma, he sat down on the edge of it and gave her a push.

'Is the pain any *better?'*

'Can't you leave me alone?' she said, rising up wrathfully. He looked again and saw that it was not Aroma after all but Skybright. Taking her by the hand, he drew her down on the bed beside him.

'You're getting so self-willed,' he said laughingly. 'when you trod on that fan this morning, I only made a harmless little remark, but look how you flew up in the *air* about it! And then when Aroma, out of the kindness of her heart, tried to reason with you, look how you pitched into *her!* Seriously, now, don't you think it was all a bit uncalled-for?'

'I'm so *hot,'* said Skybright. 'Do you *have* to maul me about like this? Suppose someone were to see us? Anyway, it's not right for me to be sitting here.'

'If you know it's not right to be sitting here,' he said teasingly, 'what were you doing lying down?'

'Che-e-e!' Unable at once to reply, she gave a little laugh. Then she said:

'When you are not here it doesn't matter. It's *your* being here that makes it wrong. Anyway, let me get up now, because I want to have a bath. Aroma and Musk have had theirs already. I'll send *them* out to you.'

'I've just had rather a lot to drink and I could do with a bath myself,' said Bao-yu. 'As you haven't had yours yet, bring the water out here and we'll have a bath together.'

Skybright laughed and declined with a vigorous gesture of her hand.

'Oh no! I daren't start you off on that caper. I still remember that time you got Emerald to help you bath. You must have been two or three hours in there, so that we began to get quite worried. We didn't like to go in while you were there, but when we did go in to have a look afterwards, we found water all over the floor, pools of water round the legs of the bed, and even the mat on the bed had water splashed all over it. Heaven only knows what you'd been up to. We laughed about it for days afterwards. I haven't got time to fetch *that* amount of water. And in any case, you don't want to go taking baths with *me.* As a matter of fact it's cooler now, so I don't think I shall have *a* bath after all. why don't you let me fetch you a bowl of water so that you can have *a nice* wash and comb your hair? Faithful just sent a lot of fruit round and we've got it soaking in iced water in the big glass bowl I'll tell them to bring some out to you, shall I?'

'All right,' said Bao-yu. 'If you're not having a bath your-self, I'll just wash my hands; and you can get me some of that fruit to eat.'

Skybright smiled.

'You've already told me once today how clumsy I am. I can't even drop a fan without treading on *it.* So I'm much too clumsy to get your fruit for you. Suppose I were to break a plate. That would be terrible!'

'If you *want* to break it, by all means break it,' said Bao-yu. 'These things are there for our use. what we use *them for* is a matter of individual taste. For example, fans are made for fanning with; but if you prefer to tear them up because it gives you pleasure, there's no reason why you shouldn't. What you *mustn't* do is to use them as objects to vent your anger on. It's the same with plates and cups. Plates and cups are made to put food and drink in. But if you want to smash them on purpose because you like the noise, it's perfectly all right to do so. As long as you don't get into a passion and start taking it Out on *things*—that is the golden rule.'

'All right then,' said Skybright with a mischievous smile. 'Give me your fan to tear. I love the sound of a fan being torn.'

Bao-yu held it out to her. She took it eagerly and—*chah!*—promptly tore it in half. And again —*chah! Chah!*

chah!—she tore it several more times. Bao-yu, an appreciative onlooker, laughed and encouraged her.

'Well torn! Well torn! Now again - a really loud one!'

Just then Musk appeared. She stared at them indignantly.

'Don't do that!' she said. 'It's *wicked* to waste things like that.'

But Bao-yu leaped up to her, snatched the fan from her hand, and passed it to Skybright, who at once tore it into several pieces. The two of them, Bao-yu and Skybright, then burst into uproarious laughter.

'What do you think you're doing?' said Musk. 'That's *my fan* you've just ruined.'

'What's an old fan?' said Bao-yu. 'Open up the fan box and get yourself another.'

'If that's your attitude,' said Musk, 'we might as well carry Out the whole boxful and let her tear away to her heart's content.'

'All right. Go and get it,' said Bao-yu.

'And be born a beggar in my next life?' said Musk. 'No thank you I She hasn't broken her arm. Let her go and get it herself.'

Skybright stretched back on the bed, smiling complacently. 'I'm rather tired just now. I think I shall tear some more tomorrow.'

Bao-yu laughed.

'The ancients used to say that for one smile of a beautiful woman a thousand taels are well spent. For a few old fans it's cheap at the price!'

He called to Aroma, who had just finished changing into clean clothes, to come outside and join them. Little Melilot came and cleared away the broken bits of fan, and everyone sat for a while and enjoyed the cool.

But our narrative supplies no further details of that evening.

*

About noon next day, while Lady Wang, Bao-chai, Dai-yu and the girls were sitting in Grandmother Jia's room, someone came in to announce that 'Miss Shi' had arrived. Shortly afterwards Shi Xiang-yun appeared in the courtyard, attended by a bevy of matrons and maids. Bao-chai, Dai-yu and the rest hurried out to the foot of the steps to welcome her.

For young girls like the cousins a reunion after a mere month's separation is an occasion for touching demonstrations of affection. After these initial transports, when they were all indoors and the greetings, introductions and salutations had been completed, Grandmother Jia suggested that, as the weather was so hot, Xiang-yun should remove her Outer garments. Xiang-yun rose to her feet with alacrity and divested herself of one or two layers. Lady Wang was amused.

'Gracious, child! What a lot you have on! I don't think I've ever seen anyone wearing so much.'

'It's my Aunt Shi who makes me wear it all,' said Xiang yun. 'You wouldn't catch me wearing this stuff if I didn't have to.'

'You don't know our Xiang-yun, Aunt,' Bao-chai interposed. 'She's really happiest in boy's clothes. That time she was here in the third or fourth month last year, I remember one day she dressed up in one of Bao-yu's gowns and put a pair of his boots on and one of his belts round her waist. At first glance she looked exactly like Cousin Bao. It was only the ear-rings that gave her away. When she stood behind that chair over there, Grandmother was completely taken in. She said, "Bao-yu, come over here! You'll get the dust from that hanging lamp in your eyes if you're not careful." But Xiang-yun just smiled and didn't move. It was only when everyone

couldn't hold it in any longer and started laughing that Grand-mother realized who it was and joined in the laugh. She told her that she made a very good4ooking boy.'

'That's nothing,' said Dai-yu. 'What about that time last year when she came to stay for a couple of days with us in the first month and it snowed? Grandma and Auntie Wang had just got back from somewhere—I think it was from visiting the ancestors' portraits—and she saw Grandma's new **scarlet** felt rain-cape lying there and put it on when no one was looking. Of course, it was much too big and much too long for her, so she hitched it up and tied it round her waist with a sash and went out like that into the back courtyard to help the maids build a snowman. And then she slipped over in it and got covered all over with mud—'

The others all laughed at the recollection.

Bao-chai asked Xiang-yun's nurse, Mrs Zhou, whether Xiang-yun was still as tomboyish as ever. Nurse Zhou laughed but said nothing.

'I don't mind her being tomboyish,' said Ying-chun, 'but I do wish she wasn't such a chatterbox. You wouldn't believe It—even when she's in bed at night it still goes on. Jabber-jabber, jabber-jabber. Then she laughs. Then she talks a bit more. Then she laughs again. And you never heard such a lot of rubbish in your life, I don't know where she gets it all from.'

'Well, perhaps she'll have got over that by now,' said Lady Wang. 'I hear that someone was round the other day to talk about a betrothal. Now that there's a future mother-in-law to think about, she can't be quite as tomboyish as she used to be.'

'Are you staying this time, or do you have to go back tonight?' asked Grandmother Jia.

'Your Old Ladyship hasn't seen all the clothes she's brought,' said Nurse Zhou. 'She'll be staying two days here at the very least.'

'Isn't Bao at home?' said Xiang-yun.

'Listen to her!' said Bao-chai. 'Cousin Bao is the only one she thinks about. He and she get on well together because they are both fond of mischief. You can see she hasn't really changed.'

'Perhaps now that you're getting older you had better stop using baby-names,' said Grandmother Jia, reminded by the talk of betrothal that her babies were rapidly turning into grown-ups.

Just then Bao-yu came in.

'Ah! Hallo, Yun! Why didn't you come when we sent for you the other day?'

'Grandmother has just this moment been saying that it is time you all stopped using baby-names,' said Lady Wang. 'I must say, this isn't a very good beginning.'

'Our cousin has got something nice to give you,' said Dai-yu to Xiang-yun.

'Oh? what is it?' said Xiang-yun.

'Don't believe her,' said Bao-yu. 'Goodness! It's no time since you were here last, but you seem to have grown taller already.'

Xiang-yun laughed.

'How's Aroma?'

'She's fine. Thank you for asking.'

'I've brought something for her,' said Xiang-yun. She produced a knotted-up silk handkerchief.

'What treasure have you got wrapped up in there?' said Bao-yu. 'The best present you could have brought Aroma would have been a couple of those cheap agate rings like the ones you sent us the other day.'

'What are these, then?'

With a triumphant smile she opened her little bundle and revealed four rings, each inset with the veined **red**

agate they had so much admired on a previous occasion.

'What a girl!' said Dai-yu. 'These are exactly the same as the ones you sent us the other day by messenger. why didn't you get him to bring these too and save yourself some trouble? I thought you must have got some wonderful rarity tied up in that handkerchief, seeing that you'd gone to all the trouble of bringing it here yourself—and all the time it was only a few more of *those!* You really are rather a silly.'

'Thilly yourthelf!' said Xiang-yun. 'The others can decide which of us is the silly one when I have explained my reason. If I send things for you and the girls, it's assumed that they are for you without the messenger even needing to say anything; but if I send things for any of the maids, I have to explain very carefully to the messenger which ones I mean. Now if the messenger is someone intelligent, that's all right; but if it's someone not so bright who has difficulty in remembering names, they'll probably make such a mess of it that they'll get not only the maids' presents mixed up, but yours as well. Then again, if the messenger is a woman, it's not so bad; but the other day it was one of the boys - and you know how hopeless *they* are over girls' names. So you see, I thought it would be simpler if I delivered the maids' ones myself. There!'—she laid the rings down one after another on the table—'One for Aroma; one for Faithful; one for Golden; and one for Patience. Can you imagine one of the boys getting those four names right ?'

The others laughed.

'Clever! Clever!' they said.

'You're always so eloquent,' said Bao-yu. 'No one else gets a chance.'

'If she weren't so eloquent, she wouldn't be worthy of the gold kylin,' said Dai-yu huffily, rising from her seat and walking off as she spoke.

Fortunately no one heard her but Ban-chai, who made a laughing grimace, and Bao-yu, who immediately regretted having once more spoken out of turn, but who, suddenly catching sight of Bao-chai's expression, could not help laughing himself. Seeing him laugh, Bao-chai at once rose from her seat and hurried off to joke with Dai-yu.

'When you've finished your tea and rested a bit,' said Grandmother Jia to Xiang-yun, 'you can go and see your married cousins. After that, you can amuse yourself in the Garden with the girls. It's nice and cool there.'

Xiang-yun thanked her grandmother. She wrapped up three of the rings again, and after sitting a little longer, went off, attended by her nannies and maids, to call on Wang Xi-feng. After chatting a while with her, she went into the Garden and called on Li Wan. Then, after sitting a short while with Li Wan, she went off in the direction of **Green** Delights in quest of Aroma. Before doing so, however, she turned to dismiss her escort.

'You needn't stay with me any longer,' she said. 'You can go off now and visit your relations. I'll just keep Fishy to wait on me.

The others thanked her and went off to look for various kith and kin, leaving Xiang-yun alone with Kingfisher.

'Why aren't these water-lilies out yet?' said Kingfisher.

'It isn't time for them yet,' said Xiang-yun.

'Look, they're going to be "double-decker" ones, like the ones in our lily-pond at home,' said Kingfisher.

'Our ones are better,' said Xiang-yun.

'They've got a pomegranate-tree here which has four or five lots of flowers growing one above the other on each branch,' said Kingfisher. 'That's a double-double-double-decker. I wonder what makes them grow like that.'

'Plants are the same as people,' said Xiang-yun. 'The healthier their constitution is, the better they grow.'

‘I don’t believe that,’ said Kingfisher with a toss of her head. ‘If that were so, why don’t we see people walking around with one head growing on top of the other?’

Xiang-yun was unable to avoid laughing at the girl’s simplicity.

‘I’ve told you before, you talk too much,’ she said. ‘Let’s see: how can one answer a question like that? Everything in the world is moulded by the forces of Yin and Yang. That means that, besides the normal, the abnormal, the peculiar, the freakish—in fact all the thousands and thousands of different variations we find in things—are caused by different combinations of Yin and Yang. Even if something appears that is so rare that no one has ever seen it before, the principle is still the same.’

‘So according to what you say,’ said Kingfisher, ‘all the things that have ever existed, from the time the world began right up to the present moment, have just been a lot of Yins and Yangs.’

‘No, stupid!’ said Xiang-yun. ‘The more you say, the sillier you get. “Just a lot of Yins and Yangs” indeed! In any case, strictly speaking Yin and Yang are not two things but one and the same thing. By the time the Yang has become exhausted, it is Yin; and by the time the Yin has become exhausted, it is Yang. It isn’t a case of one of them coming to an end and then the other one growing out of nothing.’

‘That’s too deep for me,’ said Kingfisher. ‘What sort of thing is a Yin-yang, I’d like to know? No one’s ever seen one. You just answer that, Miss. What does a Yin-yang look like?’

‘Yin-yang is a sort of force,’ said Xiang-yun. ‘It’s the force in things that gives them their distinctive forms. For example, the sky is Yang and the earth is Yin; water is Yin and fire is Yang; the sun is Yang and the moon is Yin.’

‘Ah yes! *Now* I understand,’ said Kingfisher happily. ‘That’s why astrologers call the sun the “Yang star” and the moon the “Yin star”.’

‘Holy name!’ said Xiang-yun. ‘She understands.’

‘That’s not so difficult,’ said Kingfisher. ‘But what about things like mosquitoes and fleas and midges and plants and flowers and bricks and tiles? Surely you are not going to say that they are all Yin-yang too?’

‘Certainly they are!’ said Xiang-yun. ‘Take the leaf of a tree, for example. That’s divided into Yin and Yang. The side facing upwards towards the sky is Yang; the underside, facing towards the ground, is Yin.’

Kingfisher nodded.

‘I see. Yes. I can understand that. But take these fans we are holding. Surely they don’t have Yin and Yang?’

‘Yes they do. The front of the fan is Yang; the back of the fan is Yin.’

Kingfisher nodded, satisfied. She tried to think of some other object to ask about, but being for the moment unable to, she began looking around her for inspiration. As she did so, her eye chanced to light on the gold kylin fastened in the intricate loopings of her mistress’s girdle.

‘Well, Miss,’ she said, pointing triumphantly to the kylin, you’re not going to say that *that’s* got Yin and Yang?

‘Certainly. In the case of birds and beasts the males are Yang and the females are Yin.’

‘Is this a daddy one or a mummy one?’ said Kingfisher.

‘“A daddy one or a mummy one”! Silly girl!’

‘All right, then,’ said Kingfisher. ‘But why is it that every-thing else has Yin and Yang but we haven’t?’

‘Get along with you, naughty girl! What subject wilt you get on to next?’

‘Why? Why can’t you tell me?’ said Kingfisher. ‘Anyway, I know; so there’s no need for you to be so nasty to me.’

Xiang-yun suppressed a giggle.

'You're Yang and I'm Yin,' said Kingfisher.

Xiang-yun held her handkerchief to her mouth and laughed 'Well, that's right, isn't it?' said Kingfisher. 'What are you laughing at?'

'Yes, yes,' said Xiang-yun. 'That's quite right.'

'That's what they always say,' said Kingfisher: 'the master is Yang and the servant is Yin. Even I can understand that principle.'

'I'm sure you can,' said Xiang-yun. 'Very good.'

While they were talking, a glittering golden object at the foot of the rose pergola caught Xiang-yun's eye. She pointed it out to Kingfisher.

'Go and see what it is,'

Kingfisher bounded over and picked it up.

'Ah ha!' she said, examining the object in her hand. 'Now we shall be able to see whether it's Yin or Yang.'

She took hold of the kylin fastened to Xiang-yun's girdle and held it up to look at it more closely. Xiang-yun wanted to see what it was that she held in her hand, but Kingfisher wouldn't let her.

'It's *my* treasure,' she said with a laugh. 'I won't let you see it, Miss. Funny, though. I wonder where it came from. I've never seen anyone here wearing it.'

'Come on! Let me look,' said Xiang-yun.

'There you are, Miss!' Kingfisher opened her hand.

Xiang-yun looked. It was a beautiful, shining gold kylin, both larger and more ornate than the one she was wearing. Reaching out and taking it from Kingfisher, she held it on the palm of her hand and contemplated it for some moments in silence.

Whatever reverie the contemplation inspired was broken by the sudden arrival of Bao-yu.

'What are you doing, standing out here in the blazing sun?' he asked her. 'Why don't you go and see Aroma?'

'We were on our way,' said Xiang-yun, hurriedly concealing the gold kylin.

The three of them entered the courtyard of **Green** Delights together.

Aroma had gone outside to take the air and was leaning on the verandah railings at the foot of the front door steps. As soon as she caught sight of Xiang-yun, she hurried down into the courtyard to welcome her, and taking her by the hand, led her into the house, animatedly exchanging news with her as they went.

'You should have come sooner,' said Bao-yu when they were indoors and Aroma had made Xiang-yun take a seat. 'I've got something nice for you here and I've been waiting for you to come so that I could give it to you.'

He had been hunting through his pockets as he said this. Not finding what he was searching for, he exclaimed in surprise.

'Aiyo!' He turned to Aroma. 'Have you put it away somewhere ?'

'Put what away?'

'That little kylin I got the other day.'

'You've been carrying it around with you everywhere,' said Aroma. 'Why ask *me* about it?'

Bao-yu clapped his hands together in vexation.

'Oh, I've lost it! Wherever am I going to look for it?'

He got up to begin searching.

Xiang-yun now realized that it must have been Bao-yu who dropped the kylin she had only a few

minutes earlier discovered outside.

'Since when have *you* had a kylin?' she asked him. 'Oh, several days now,' said Bao-yu. 'What a shame! I'll never get another one like that. And the trouble is, I don't know when I can have lost it. Oh dear! How stupid of me!'

'It's only an ornament you're getting so upset about,' said Xiang-yun. 'What a good job it wasn't something more serious!'

She opened her hand:

'Look! Is that it?'

Bao-yu looked and saw, with extravagant delight, that it was.

The remainder of this episode will be told in the following chapter.

CHAPTER 32

Bao-yu demonstrates confusion of mind by making his declaration to the wrong person
And Golden shows an unconquerable spirit by ending her humiliation in death

OUR last chapter told of Bao-yu's delight at seeing the gold kylin again. He reached out eagerly and took it from Xiang-yun's hand.

Fancy your finding it!' he said. 'How did you come to pick it up?'

'It's a good job it was only this you lost,' she said. 'One of these days it will be your seal of office—and then it won't be quite so funny.'

'Oh, losing one's seal of office is nothing,' said Bao-yu. Losing a thing like this is much more serious.'

Aroma meanwhile was pouring tea.

'I heard your good news the other day,' she said, handing Xiang-yun a cup. 'Congratulations!'

Xiang-yun bent low over the cup to hide her blushes and made no reply.

'Why so bashful, Miss?' said Aroma. 'Have you forgotten the things you used to tell me at night all those years ago, when we used to sleep together in the little closet-bed at Her Old Ladyship's? You weren't very bashful then. What makes you so bashful with me now, all of a sudden?'

Xiang-yun's face became even redder. She gave a forced little laugh.

'Who's talking? That was a time when you and I were very close to each other. Then I had to go back home when my uncle's first wife died and you were given Cousin Bao to look after, and I don't know why, but whenever I came back here after that, you seemed somehow changed towards me.'

It was now Aroma's turn to blush and protest.

'When you first came to live here it was "Pearl dear this" and "Pearl dear that" all the time. You were always coaxing me to do things for you—do your hair, wash your face, or I don't know what. But now that's all changed. Now you're the young lady, aren't you? You can't act the young lady with me and expect me to stay on the same familiar terms as before.'

'Holy name!' said Xiang-yun, now genuinely indignant. 'That's *tho* unfair. I wish I may die if I ever "acted the young lady" with you, as you put it. I come here in this frightful heat, and the very first person I want to see

when I get here is you. Ask Fishy if you don't believe me. *She* can tell you. At home I'm *always* going on about you.

Aroma and Bao-yu both laughed.

'Don't take it to heart so, it was only a joke. You shouldn't be so excitable.'

'Don't, whatever you do, admit that what *you* said was wounding,' said Xiang-yun. 'Say I'm "excitable" and put *me* in the wrong!'

While she said this, she was undoing the knotted silk hand-kerchief and extracting one of the three rings from it. She handed it to Aroma. Aroma was greatly touched.

'I've got one like this already,' she said. 'It was given to me when you sent those ones the other day to the young ladies. But fancy your bringing this one here specially! Now I *know* you haven't forgotten me. It's little things like this that show you what a person really is. The ring itself isn't worth much, I know. It's the thought behind it.'

'Who gave you the one you've already got?' said Xiang-yun.

'Miss Bao,' said Aroma.

'Ah,' said Xiang-yun, 'Miss Bao. And I was thinking it must have been Miss Lin. Often when I'm at home I think to myself that of all my cousins Bao-chai is the one I like best. It's a pity we couldn't have been born of the same mother. With her for an elder sister it wouldn't matter so much being an orphan.'

Her eyelids reddened as she said this and she seemed to be on the verge of tears.

'Now, now, now!' said Bao-yu. 'Don't say things like that.'

'And why not?' said Xiang-yun. 'Oh, I know your trouble. You're afraid that Cousin Lin might hear and get angry with me again for praising Cousin Bao. That's what's worrying you, isn't it?'

Aroma giggled.

'Oh Miss Yun! You're just as outspoken as you used to be.'

'Well, I've said that you lot are difficult to talk to,' said Bao-yu, 'and I was certainly right!'

'Don't make me sick,' said Xiang-yun. 'You say what you like to us. It's with your Cousin Lin that you have to be so careful.'

'Never mind about that,' said Aroma. 'Joking apart, now:
I want to ask you a favour.'

'What is it?' said Xiang-yun.

'I've got a pair of slipper-tops here that I've already cut the openwork pattern in, but as I haven't been very well this last day or two, I haven't been able to sew them on to the backing material. Do you think you'd have time to do them for me ?'

'That's rather a strange request,' said Xiang-yun. 'Quite apart from all the clever maids this household employs you have your own full4ime tailors and embroiderers. Why ask *me* to do your sewing? You could give it to anyone here you liked. They could hardly refuse you.'

'You can't be serious,' said Aroma. 'None of the sewing in this room is allowed to go outside. Surely you knew that?'

Xiang-yun inferred from this that the slippers in question were for Bao-yu.

'Oh well,' she said, 'in that case I suppose I'd better do them for you. On one condition, though: I'll do them if they are for you to wear, but if they are for anyone else, I'm afraid I can't.'

'Get along with you!' said Aroma. 'Ask you to make slippers for *me?* I wouldn't have the nerve. No, I'll be honest with you, they're not for me. Never mind who they're for. Just tell yourself that I'm the one you'll be

doing the favour.'

'It isn't *that,*' said Xiang-yun. 'In the past I've done lots of things for you. Surely you must *know* what makes me unwilling now?'

'I'm sorry, I don't,' said Aroma.

'What about the person who got in a temper the other day when that fan-case I made for you was compared with hers and cut it up with a pair of scissors? *I* heard all about that, so don't start protesting. If you expect me to do sewing for you after *that*, you're just treating me as your drudge.'

'I didn't know at the time it was you who made it,' Bao-yu put in hurriedly.

'He really didn't,' said Aroma. 'I pretended there was someone outside we'd just discovered who could do very fine and original needlework. I told him I'd got them to do that fan-case for him as a sample. He believed what I said and went around showing it to everyone. Unfortunately while he was doing this he upset you know who and she took a pair of scissors and cut it in pieces. Afterwards he was very anxious to have some more work done by the same person, so I had to tell him who it really was. He was very upset when he heard that it was you.'

'I still think this is a very strange request,' said Xiang-yun. 'If Miss Lin can cut things up, she can sew them for him, too. Why not ask *her* to do them for you?'

'Oh, *she* wouldn't want to do them,' said Aroma. 'And even if she did, Her Old Ladyship wouldn't let her, for fear of her tiring herself. The doctors say she needs rest and quiet. I wouldn't want to trouble *her* with them. Last year she took practically the whole year embroidering one little purse, and this last six months I don't think she's picked up a needle.'

Their conversation was interrupted by a servant with a message:

'Mr Jia of Rich Street is here. The Master says will Master Bao receive him, please?'

Recognizing the 'Mr Jia' of the message as Jia Yu-cun, Bao-yu was more than a little vexed. While Aroma hurried off for his going-out clothes, he sat pulling his boots on and grumbling.

'He's got Father to talk to, surely that's enough for him? Why does he always have to see me?'

Xiang-yun laughed at his disgruntlement:

'I'm sure you're very good at entertaining people,' she said. 'That's why Sir Zheng asks you to see him.'

'That message didn't come from Father,' said Bao-yu. 'He'll have made it up himself.'

'"When the host is refined, the callers are frequent,"' said Xiang-yun. 'There must be something about you that has impressed him, otherwise he wouldn't want to see you.'

'I make no claim to being refined, thanks all the same,' said Bao-yu. 'I'm as common as dirt. And furthermore I have no wish to mix with people of his sort.'

'You're incorrigible,' said Xiang-yun. 'Now that you're older, you ought to be mixing with these officials and administrators as much as you can. Even if you don't want to take the Civil Service examinations and become an administrator yourself, you can learn a lot from talking to these people about the way the Empire is governed and the people who govern it that will stand you in good stead later on, when you come to manage your own affairs and take your place in society. You might even pick up one or two decent, respectable friends that way. You'll certainly never get anywhere if you spend all your time with us girls.'

Bao-yu found such talk highly displeasing.

'I think perhaps you'd better go and sit in someone else's room,' he said. 'I wouldn't want a *decent, respectable* young lady like you to get contaminated.'

'Don't try reasoning with him, Miss,' Aroma put in hurriedly. 'Last time Miss Bao tried it, he was just as

rude to her. No consideration for her feelings whatever. He just said "Hai!", picked up his heels, and walked out of the room, leaving her still half-way through her sentence. Poor Miss Bao I She was so embarrassed she turned bright **red.** She didn't know *what* to say. A good job it was her, though, and not Miss Lin. If it had been Miss Lin, there'd have been weeping and carrying on and I don't know what. I really admire the way Miss Bao behaved on that occasion. She just stood there a while collecting herself and then walked quietly out of the room. Myself, I was quite upset, thinking she must be offended. But not a bit of it. Next time she came round, it was just as if nothing had happened. A real little lady, Miss Bao—and generous-hearted, too. And yet the funny thing is that his lordship seems to have fallen out with her, whereas Miss Lin, who is always getting on her high horse and ignoring him, has him running round and apologizing to her all the time.'

'Have you ever heard Miss Lin talking that sort of stupid rubbish?' said Bao-yu. 'I'd long since have fallen out with *her* if she did.'

Aroma and Xiang-yun shook their heads pityingly.

'So that's "stupid rubbish", is it?' they said, laughing.

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Dai-yu tightly surmised that now Xiang-yun had arrived, Bao-yu would lose no time in telling her about his newly acquired kylin.

Now Dai-yu had observed that in the romances which Bao-yu smuggled in to her and of which she was nowadays an avid consumer, it was always some trinket or small object of clothing or jewellery a pair of lovebirds, a male and female phoenix, a jade ring, a gold buckle, a silken handkerchief, an embroidered belt or what not—that brought the heroes and heroines together. And since the fate and future happiness of those fortunate beings seemed to depend wholly on the instrumentality of such trifling objects, it was natural for her to suppose that Bao-yu's acquisition of the gold kylin would become the occasion of a dramatic rupture with *her* and the beginning of an association with Xiang-yun in which he and Xiang-yun would do together all those delightful things that she had read about in the romances.

It was with such apprehensions that she made her way stealthily towards **Green** Delights, her intention being to observe how the two of them were behaving and shape her own actions accordingly. Imagine her surprise when, just as she was about to enter, she heard Xiang-yun lecturing Bao-yu on his social obligations and Bao-yu telling Xiang-yun that 'Cousin Lin never talked that sort of rubbish' and that if she did he would have 'fallen out with her long ago'. Mingled emotions of happiness, alarm, sorrow and regret assailed her.

Happiness:

Because after all (she thought) I wasn't mistaken in my judgement of you. I always thought of you as a true friend, and I was right.

Alarm:

Because if you praise me so unreservedly in front of other people, your warmth and affection are sure, sooner or later, to excite suspicion and be misunderstood.

Regret:

Because if you are my true friend, then I am yours and the two of us are a perfect match. But in that case why did there have to be all this talk of 'the gold and the jade'? Alter-natively, if there had to be all this talk of gold and jade, why weren't we the two to have them? Why did there have to be a Bao-chai with her golden

locket?

Sorrow:

Because though there are things of burning importance to be said, without a father or a mother I have no one to say them for me. And besides, I feel so muzzy lately and I know that my illness is gradually gaining a hold on me. (The doctors say that the weakness and anaemia I suffer from may be the beginnings of a consumption.) So even if I *am* your true love, I fear I may not be able to wait for you. And even though you are mine, you can do nothing to alter my fate.

At that point in her reflections she began to weep; and feeling in no fit state to be seen, she turned away from the door and began to make her way back again.

Bao-yu had finished his hasty dressing and now came out of the house. He saw Dai-yu slowly walking on ahead of him and, judging by her appearance from behind, wiping her eyes. He hurried forward to catch up with her.

'Where are you off to, coz? Are you crying again? Who has upset you this time?'

Dai-yu turned and 8aw that it was Bao-yu.

'I'm perfectly all right,' she said, forcing a smile. 'What would I be crying for?'

'Look at you! The tears are still wet on your face. How can you tell such fibs?'

Impulsively he stretched out his hand to wipe them. Dai-yu recoiled several paces:

'You'll get your head chopped off!' she said. 'You really *must* keep your hands to yourself'

'I'm sorry. My feelings got the better of me. I'm afraid I wasn't thinking about my head.'

'No, I forgot,' said Dai-yu. 'Losing your head is nothing, is it? It's losing your kylin—the famous *gold* kylin-that is really serious!'

Her words immediately put Bao-yu in a passion. He came up to her and held his face close to hers.

'Do you say these things to put a curse on me? or is it merely to make me angry that you say them ?'

Remembering their recent quarrel, Dai-yu regretted her careless reintroduction of its theme and hastened to make amends

'Now don't get excited. I shouldn't have said that - oh come now, it really isn't *that* important! Look at you! The veins are standing out on your forehead and your face is all covered with sweat.'

She moved forward and wiped the perspiration from his brow. For some moments he stood there motionless, staring at her. Then he said:

'Don't worry!'

Hearing this, Dai-yu herself was silent for some moments. 'Why *should* I worry?' she said eventually. 'I don't understand you. Would you mind telling me what you are talking about?'

Bao-yu sighed.

'Do you really not understand? Can I really have been all this time mistaken in my feelings towards you? If you don't even know your *own* mind, it's small wonder that you're always getting angry on *my* account.'

'I really don't understand what you mean about not worrying,' said Dai-yu.

Bao-yu sighed again and shook his head.

'My dear coz, don't think you can fool me. If you don't understand what I've just said, then not only have feelings towards you been all along mistaken, but all that yon have ever felt for *me* has been wasted, too. It's because you worry so much that you've made yourself ill. If only you could take things a bit easier, your illness wouldn't go on getting more and more serious all the time.'

Dai-yu was thunderstruck. He had read her mind - had seen inside her more clearly than if she had plucked out her entrails and held them out for his inspection. And now there were a thousand things that she wanted to tell him; yet though she was dying to speak, she was unable to utter a single syllable and stood there like a simpleton, gazing at him in silence.

Bao-yu, too, had a thousand things to say, but he, too, stood mutely gazing at her, not knowing where to begin.

After the two of them had stared at each other for some considerable time in silence, Dai-yu heaved a deep sigh. The tears gushed from her eyes and she turned and walked away. Bao-yu hurried after her and caught at her dress.

'Coz dear, stop a moment! Just let me say one word.'

As she wiped her eyes with one hand, Dai-yu pushed him away from her with the other.

'There's nothing to say I already know what you want to tell me.'

She said this without turning back her head, and having said it, passed swiftly on her way. Bao-yu remained where he was standing, gazing after her in silent stupefaction.

Now Bao-yu had left the apartment in such haste that he had forgotten to take his fan with him. Fearing that he would be very hot without it, Aroma hurried outside to give it to him, but when she noticed him standing some way ahead of her talking to Dai-yu, she halted. After a little while she saw Dai-yu walk away and Bao-yu continue standing motionless where he was. She chose this moment to go up and speak to him.

'You've gone out without your fan,' she said. 'It's a good job I noticed. Here you are. I ran out to give it to you.

Bao-yu, still in a muse, saw Aroma there talking to him, yet without clearly perceiving who it was. With the same glazed look in his eyes, he began to speak.

Dearest coz! I've never before dared to tell you what I felt for you. Now at last I'm going to pluck -up courage and tell you, and after that I don'-t care what becomes of me. Because of you I, too, have made myself ill—only I haven't dared tell anyone about it and have had to bear it all in silence. And the day that your illness is cured, I do believe that mine, too, will get better. Night and day, coz, seeping and dreaming, you are never out of my mind.'

Aroma -listened to this declaration aghast.

'Holy saints preserve us!' she exclaimed. 'He'll be the death of me.'

She gave him a shake.

'What are you talking about? Are you bewitched? You'd better hurry.'

Bao-yu seemed suddenly to waken from his trance and recognized the person he had been speaking to as Aroma. His face turned a deep **red** with embarrassment and he snatched the fan from her and fled.

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After he had gone, Aroma began thinking about the words he had just said and realized that they must have been intended for Dai-yu. She reflected with some alarm that if things between them were as his words seemed to indicate, there was every likelihood of an ugly scandal developing, and wondered how she could arrange matters to prevent it. Preoccupied with these reflections, she stood as motionless and unseeing 3as her master had done a few moments before. Bao-chai found her in this state on her way back from the house.

'What are you brooding on, out in the burning sun ?' she asked her, laughing.

Aroma laughed back.

'There were two little sparrows here- having a fight. They were so funny, I had to stand and watch them.'

'Where was Cousin Bao rushing off to just now, all dressed up for going out?' said Bao-chai. 'I was going to call out and ask him, but he is getting so crotchety lately that I thought I had better not.'

'The Master sent for him,' said Aroma.

'Oh dear!' said Bao-chai. 'I wonder why he should send for him in heat like this? I hope he hasn't thought of something to be angry about and called him over to be punished.'

'No, it isn't that,' said Aroma. 'I think it's to receive a visitor.'

'It must be a very tiresome visitor,' said Bao-chai, 'to go around bothering people on a boiling day like this instead of staying at home and trying to keep cool.'

'You can say that again!' said Aroma.

'What's young Xiang-yun been doing at your place?' said Bao-chai, changing the subject.

'We were having a chat,' said Aroma, 'and after that she had a look at some slipper-tops that I've got ready pasted and have asked her to sew for me.'

'You're an intelligent young woman,' said Bao-chai, having first looked to right and left of her to make sure that no one else was about, 'I should have thought you'd have sense enough to leave her a few moments in peace. I've been watching our Yun lately, and from what I've observed of her and various stray remarks I've heard, I get the impression that back at home she can barely call her soul her own. I know for a fact that they are too mean to pay for professional seamstresses and that nearly all the sewing has to be done by the women of the household, and I'm pretty sure that's why, whenever she's found herself alone with me on these last few visits, she's told me how tired she gets at home. When I press her for details, her eyes fill with tears and she answers evasively, as though she'd like to tell me but daren't. It must be very hard for her, losing both her parents when she was so young. It quite wrings my heart to see her so exploited.'

Aroma smote her hands together as understanding dawned.

'Yes, I *see*. I see now why she was so slow with those ten butterfly bows I asked her to sew for me last month. It was ages before she sent them, and even then there was a message to say that she'd only been able to do them roughly. She told me I'd better use them on something else. "If you want nice, even ones," she said, "you'll have to wait until next time I come to stay with you." Now I can see why. She didn't like to refuse when I asked her, but I suppose she had to sit up till midnight doing them, poor thing. Oh, how stupid of me! I'd never have asked her if I'd realized.'

'Last time she was here, she told me that it's quite normal for her to sit up sewing until midnight,' said Bao-chai; 'and if her aunt or the other women catch her doing the slightest bit of work for anyone else, they are angry with her.'

'It's all the fault of that pig-headed young master of mine,' said Aroma. 'He refuses to let any of his sewing be done by the seamstresses outside. Every bit of work, large or small, has to be done in his room and I just can't manage it all on my own.'

Bao-chai laughed.

'Why do you take any notice of him? Why not simply give it to the seamstresses without telling him?'

'He's not so easy to fool,' said Aroma. 'He can tell the difference. I'm afraid there's nothing for it. I shall just have to work through it all gradually on my own

'Now just a minute!' said Bao-chai. 'We'll think of a way round this. Suppose I were to do some of it for

you?'

'Would you really?' said Aroma. 'I'd be so grateful if you would. I'll come over with some this evening then.'

She had barely finished saying this when an old woman came rushing up to them in a state of great agitation.

'Isn't it dreadful? Miss Golden has drowned herself in the well.'

'Which Golden? said Aroma, startled.

'Which Golden?' said the old woman. 'There aren't two Goldens that I know of. Golden from Her Ladyship's room, of course, that was dismissed the day before yesterday. She'd been crying and carrying on at home ever since, but nobody paid much attention to her. Then suddenly, when they went to look for her, she wasn't there, and just now someone going to-fetch-water from the well by the south-east corner *found* body in it and rushed inside for help, and when they fished it out, they found that it was Golden. They did all they could to revive her, but it was too late. She was dead.'

'How strange!' said Bao-chai

Aroma shook her head wonderingly and a teat or two stole down her cheek. She and Golden had been like sisters to each other.

Bao-chai hurried off to Lady Wang's to offer her sympathy. Aroma went back to **Green** Delights.

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When Bao-chai arrived at Lady Wang's apartment she found the whole place hushed and still and Lady Wang sitting in the inner room on her own, crying. Deeming it an unsuitable moment to raise the subject of her visit, Bao-chai sat down beside her in silence.

'Where have you just come from?' Lady Wang asked her.

'The Garden.'

'The Garden,' Lady Wang echoed. 'Did you by any chance see your cousin Bao-yu there?'

'I saw him going out just now wearing his outdoor clothes, but I don't know where he was going to.'

Lady Wang nodded and gave a sigh.

'I don't know if you've heard. Something very strange has happened. Golden has drowned herself in a well.'

'That *is* strange,' said Bao-chai. 'Why ever did she do that?'

'The day before yesterday she broke something of mine,' said Lady Wang, 'and in a moment of anger I struck her a couple of times and sent her back to her mother's. I had only been meaning to leave her there a day or two to punish her. After that I would have had her back again. I never dreamed that she would be so angry with me as to drown herself. Now that she has, I feel that it is all my fault.'

'It's only natural that a kind person like you should see it in that way,' said Bao-chai, 'but in my opinion Golden would never have drowned herself in anger. It's much more likely that she was playing about beside the

well and slipped in accidentally. While she was in service her movements were restricted and it would be natural for-her to go running around everywhere during her first day or two outside. There's no earthly reason why she should have felt angry enough with you to drown herself. If she did, all I can say is that she was a stupid person and not worth feeling sorry for!'

Lady Wang sighed and shook her head doubtfully.

'Well, it may be as you say, but I still feel very uneasy in my mind.'

'I'm sure you have no cause, Aunt,' said Bao-chai, 'but if you feel *very* much distressed, I suggest that you simply give her family a little extra for the funeral. In that way you will more than fulfill any moral obligation you may -have towards her as a mistress.'

'I have just given her mother fifty taels,' said Lady Wang. 'I wanted to give her two new outfits as well from one of the girls' wardrobes, but it just so happens that at the moment none of them apart from your Cousin Lin has got anything new that would do. Your Cousin Lin has got two sets that we had made for her next birthday, but she is such a sensitive child and has had so much sickness and misfortune in her life that I'm afraid she would almost certainly feel superstitious about the clothes made for her birthday being used for dressing a corpse with, so I've had to ask the tailors to make up a couple in a hurry. Of course, if it were any other maid, I should have given the mother a few taels and that would have been the end of the matter. But though Golden was only a servant, she had been with me so long that she had become almost like a daughter to me.'

She began to cry again as she said this.

'There's no need to hurry the tailors about this,' said Bao-chai. 'I've got two new outfits that I recently finished making for myself. Why not let her mother have *them* and save them the trouble? Golden once or twice wore old dresses of mine in the past, so I know they will fit her.'

'That's very kind of you, but aren't you superstitious?' said Lady Wang.

Bao-chai laughed.

'Don't worry about *that,* Aunt. That 5-ort of thing has never bothered me.'

At that she rose and went off to fetch them. Lady Wang hurriedly ordered two of the servants to go after her.

When Bao-chai returned with the clothes, she found Bao-yu sitting beside his mother in tears. Lady Wang was evidently in the midst of rebuking him about something, but as soon as she caught sight of Bao-chai, she closed her mouth and fell silent. From the scene before her eyes and the word or two she had overheard, Bao-chai was able to form a pretty good idea of what had been happening. She handed the clothes over to Lady Wang and Lady Wang summoned Golden's mother to come and fetch them.

What happened after that will be told in the following chapter.

CHAPTER 33

An envious younger brother puts in a malicious word or two
And a scapegrace elder brother receives a terrible chastisement

OUR story last told how Golden's mother was summoned to take away the clothing that Bao-chai had brought for Golden's laying-out. When she arrived, Lady Wang called her inside, and after making her an additional present of some jewellery, advised her to procure the services 6f some Buddhist monks to recite a *sūtra* for the salvation

of the dead girl's soul. Golden's mother kotowed her thanks and departed with the clothes and jewellery.

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The news that Golden's disgrace had driven her to take her own life had reached Bao-yu as he was returning from his interview with Jia Yu-cun, and he was already in a state of shock when he went in to see his mother, only to be subjected by her to a string of accusations and reproaches, to which he was unable to reply. He availed himself of the opportunity presented by Bao-chai's arrival to slip quietly out again, and wandered along, scarcely knowing where he was going, still in a state of shock, hands clasped behind him, head down low, and sighing as he went.

Without realizing it he was drifting towards the main reception hall, and was in fact just emerging from behind the screen-wall that masked the gateway leading from the inner to the outer part of the mansion, when he walked head-on into someone coming from the opposite direction.

'Stand where you are!' said this person in a harsh voice.

Bao-yu looked up with a start and saw that it was his father. He gave an involuntary gasp of fear and, dropping his hands to his sides, hastily assumed a more deferential posture.

'Now,' said Jia Zheng, 'will you kindly explain the meaning of these sighs and of this moping, hang-dog appearance? You took your time coming when Yu-cun called for you just now, and I gather that when you did eventually vouchsafe your presence, he found you dull and listless and without a lively word to say for yourself. And look at you now—sullenness and secret depravity written all over your face! What are these sighings and groanings supposed to indicate? What have *you* got to he discontented or displeased about? Come, sit! What is the meaning of this?'

Bao-yu was normally ready enough with his tongue, but on this occasion grief for Golden so occupied his mind (at that moment he would very willingly have changed places with her) that though he heard the words addressed to him by his father, he failed to take in their meaning and merely stared back at him stupidly.

Seeing him too hypnotized by fear—or so it appeared—to answer with his usual promptness, Jia Zheng, who had not been angry to start with, was now well on the way to becoming so; but the irate comment he was about to make was checked when a servant from the outer gate announced that a representative of 'His Highness the Prince of Zhong-shun' had arrived.

Jia Zheng was puzzled.

'The Prince of Zhong-shun?' he thought. 'I have never had any dealings with the Prince of Zhong-shun. I wonder why *he* should suddenly send someone to see me ...?'

'He told the man to invite the prince's messenger to sit-in the hall, while he himself hurried inside and changed into court dress. On entering the hall to receive his visitor, he found that it was the Prince of Zhong-shun's chamberlain who had come to see him. After an exchange of hows and verbal salutations, the two men sat down and tea was served. The chamberlain cut short the customary civilities by coming straight to the point.

'It would have been temerity on my part to have intruded on the leisure of an illustrious scholar in the privacy of his home, but in fact it is not for the purpose of paying a social call that I am here, but on orders from His Highness. His Highness has a small request to make of you. If you will be so good as to oblige hint, not only will His Highness be extremely grateful himself, but I and my colleagues will also be very much beholden to you.,

Jia Zheng was totally at a loss to imagine what the purpose of the man's visit might be; nevertheless he rose to his feet out of respect for the prince and smiled politely.

'You have orders from His Highness for me? I shall be happy to perform them if you will have the goodness to instruct me.'

'I don't think any *performing* will be necessary,' said the chamberlain drily. 'All we want from you is a few words. A young actor called Bijou—a female impersonator—has gone missing from the palace. He hasn't been back now for four or live days; and though we have looked everywhere we can think of, we can't make out where he can have got to. However, in the course of the very extensive inquiries we have made both inside and outside the city, eight out of ten of the people we have spoken to say that he has recently been very thick with the young gentleman who was born with the jade in his mouth. Well, obviously we couldn't come inside here and search as we would have done if this had been anyone else's house, so we had to go back and report the matter to His Highness; and His Highness says that though he could view the loss of a hundred ordinary actors with equanimity, this Bijou is so skilled in anticipating his wishes and so essential to his peace of mind that it would be utterly impossible for him to dispense with his services. I have therefore come here to request you to ask your son if he will -be good enough to let Bijou come back again. By doing so he will not only earn the undying gratitude of the Prince, but will also save me and my colleagues a great deal of tiring and disagreeable searching.'

The chamberlain concluded with a sweeping bow.

Surprised and angered by what he had heard, Jia Zheng immediately sent for Bao-yu, who presently came hurrying in, ignorant of what the reason for his summons might be.

'Miserable scum I' said Jia Zheng. 'It is not enough, apparently, that you should neglect your studies when you are at home. It seems that you must needs go perpetrating enormities outside. This Bijou I have been hearing about is under the patronage of His Royal Highness the Prince of Zhong-shun. How could you have the unspeakable effrontery to commit an act of enticement on his person—involving *me*, incidentally, in the consequences of your wrong-doing?'

The question made Bao-yu start.

'I honestly know nothing about this,' he said. 'I don't even know who or what "Bijou" is, let alone what you mean by enticement

Jia Zheng was about to exclaim, but the chamberlain forestalled him.

'There is really no point in concealment, young gentleman,' he said coldly. 'Even if you are not hiding him here, we are sure that you know where he is. In either case you had much better say straight out and save us a lot of trouble. I'd be greatly obliged if you would.'

'I really don't know,' said Bao-yu. 'You must have been misinformed.'

The chamberlain gave a sardonic laugh.

'I have, of course, got evidence for what I am saying and I'm afraid you are doing yourself little good by forcing me to mention it in front of your father. You say you don't know who Bijou is. Very well. Then will you kindly explain how his **red** cummerbund came to find its way around your waist?'

Bao-yu stared at him open-mouthed, too stunned to reply.

'If he knows even a private thing like that,' he thought, 'there's little likelihood of my being able to hoodwink him about anything else. I'd better get rid of him as quickly as possible, before he can say any more.'

'Since you have managed to find Out so much about him,' he said, finding his tongue at last, 'I'm surprised that so important a thing as buying a house should have escaped you. From what I've heard, he recently acquired a little villa and an acre or so of land at Fort Redwood, seven miles east of the walls. I suppose he could be there.'

The chamberlain smiled.

'If you say so, then no doubt that is where we shall find him. I shall go and look there immediately. If I do find him there, you will hear no more from me; if not, I shall be back again for further instructions.'

So saying, he hurriedly took his leave.

Jia Zheng, his eyes glaring and his mouth contorted with rage, went after the chamberlain to see him out. He turned briefly towards Bao-yu as he was leaving the hall.

'You stay where you are. I shall deal with you when I get back.'

As he was on his way in again after seeing the chamberlain off the premises, Jia Huan with two or three pages at his heels came stampeding across the courtyard.

'Hit that boy!' Jia Zheng shouted, outraged. But Jia Huan, reduced to a quivering jelly of fear by the sight of his father) had already jolted to a halt and was standing with bowed head in front of him.

'And what is the meaning of this?' said Jia Zheng. 'What has become of the people who are supposed to look after you? Why do they allow you to gallop around in this extraordinary fashion?' His voice rose to a shout: 'Where are the people responsible for taking this boy to school?'

Jia Huan saw in his father's anger an opportunity of exercising his malice.

'I didn't mean to run, Father, but just as I was going by the well back there I saw the body of a maid who had drowned herself—all swollen up with water, and her head all swollen. It was *horrible*. I just couldn't help myself.'

Jia Zheng heard him with incredulous horror.

'What are you saying? *Who* has drowned herself? Such a thing has never before happened in our family. Our family has always been lenient and considerate in its treatment of inferiors. It is one of our traditions. I suppose it is because I have been too neglectful of household matters during these last few years. Those in charge have felt encouraged to abuse their authority, until finally an appalling thing like this can happen an innocent young life cut off by violence. What a terrible disgrace to our ancestors if this should get about! He turned and shouted a command.

'Fetch Jia Lian and Lai Da!'

'Sir!' chorused the pages, and were on the point of doing so when Jia Huan impulsively stepped forward, threw himself on his knees and clung to his father's skirts.

'Don't be angry with me, Father, but apart from the servants in Lady Wang's room, no one else knows anything about this. I heard my mother say '

He broke off and glanced around behind him. Jia Zheng understood and signaled with his eyes to the pages, who obediently withdrew some distance back to either side of the courtyard. Jia Huan continued in a voice lowered almost to a whisper.

'My mother told me that the day before yesterday, in Lady Wang's room, my brother Bao-yu tried to rape one of Her Ladyship's maids called Golden, and when she wouldn't let him, he gave her a beating; and Golden was so upset that she threw herself in the well and was drowned,

Jia Zheng, whose face had now turned to a ghastly gold-leaf colour, interrupted him with a dreadful cry.

'Fetch Bao-yu !'

He began to stride -towards -his study, shouting to all and sundry as he went.

'If anyone tries to stop me *this* time, I shall make over my house and property and my post at the Ministry and everything else I have to him and Bao-yu. I absolutely refuse to be responsible for the boy any longer. I shall cut off my few remaining hairs (those that worry and wretchedness have left me) and look for some clean and

decent spot to end my days in. Perhaps in that way I shall escape the charge of having disgraced my ancestors by rearing this unnatural monster as my son.'

When they saw the state he was in, the literary gentlemen and senior menservants who were waiting for him in the study, guessed that Bao-yu must be the cause of it and, looking at each other with various grimaces, biting their thumbs or sticking their tongues out, hastily retreated from the room. Jia-Zheng entered it alone and sat down, stiffly upright, in a chair. He was breathing heavily and his face was bathed in tears. Presently, when he had regained his breath, he barked out a rapid series of commands:

'Bring Bao-yu here. Get a heavy bamboo. Get some rope to tie him with. Close the courtyard gates. If anyone tries to take word through inside, kill him!'

'Sir! —Sir!—Sir!' the terrified pages chorused in unison at each of his commands, and some of them went off to look for Bao-yu.

Jia Zheng's ominous 'Stay where you are' as he went out with the chamberlain had warned Bao-yu that something dire was imminent—though just how much more dire as a result of Jia Huan's malicious intervention he could not have foreseen and as he stood where his father had left him, he twisted and turned himself about, anxiously looking for some passer-by who could take a message through to the womenfolk inside. But no one came. Even the omnipresent Tealeaf was on this occasion nowhere to be seen. Then suddenly, in answer to his prayers, an old woman appeared—a darling, precious treasure of an old woman (or so she seemed at that moment)—and he dashed forward and clung to her beseechingly.

'Quickly! ' he said. 'Go and tell them that Sir Zheng is going to beat me. Quickly! Quickly! Go-and tell. GO AND TELL.'

Partly because agitation had made him incoherent and partly because, as ill luck would have it, the old woman was deaf, almost everything he said had escaped her except for the 'Go and tell', which she misheard as 'in the well'. She smiled at him reassuringly.

'Let her jump in the well then, young master. Don't you worry your pretty head about it!'

Realizing that he had deafness, too, to contend with, he now became quite frantic.

'GO AND TELL MY PAGES.'

'Her wages?' the old woman asked in some surprise. 'Bless you, of course they paid her wages! Her Ladyship gave a whole lot of money towards the funeral as well. And clothes. Paid her wages, indeed!'

Bao-yu stamped his feet in a frenzy of impatience. He was still wondering despairingly how to make her understand when Jia Zheng's pages arrived and forced him to go with them to the study.

Jia Zheng turned a pair of wild and bloodshot eyes on him as he entered. Forgetting the 'riotous and dissipated conduct abroad leading to the unseemly bestowal of impudicities on a theatrical performer' and the 'neglect of proper pursuits and studies at home culminating in the attempted violation of a parent's maidservant' and all the other high-sounding charges he had been preparing to hurl against him, he shouted two brief orders to the pages.

'Gag his mouth. Beat him to death.'

The pages were too frightened not to comply. Two held Bao-yu face downwards on a bench while a third lifted up the flattened bamboo sweep and began to strike him with it across the hams. After about a dozen blows *Jia* Zheng, not satisfied that his executioner was hitting hard enough, kicked him impatiently aside, wrested the bamboo from his grasp, and, gritting his teeth, brought it down with the utmost savagery on the places that had already been beaten.

At this point the literary gentlemen, sensing that Bao-yu was in serious danger of life and limb, came in

again to remonstrate; but Jia Zheng refused to hear them.

'Ask him what he has done and then tell me if you think I should spare him,' he said. 'It is the encouragement of people like you that has corrupted him; and now, when things have come to this pass, you intercede for him. I suppose you would like me to wait until he commits parricide, or worse. Would you still intercede for him then?'

They could see from this reply that he was beside himself. Wasting no further time on words, they quickly withdrew and looked for someone to take a message through inside.

Lady Wang did not stop to tell Grandmother Jia when she received it. She snatched up an outer garment, pulled it about her, and, supported by a single maid, rushed off, not caring what menfolk might see her, to the outer study, bursting into it with such suddenness that the literary gentlemen and other males present were unable to avoid her.

Her entry provoked Jia Zheng to fresh transports of fury. Faster and harder fell the bamboo on the prostrate form of Bao-yu, which by now appeared to be unconscious, for when the boys holding it down relaxed their hold and fled from -their Mistress's presence, it had long since ceased even to twitch. Even so Jia Zheng would have continued beating it had not Lady Wang clasped the bamboo to her bosom and prevented him.

'Enough I' said Jia Zheng. 'Today you are determined, all of you, to drive me insane.'

'No doubt Bao-yu deserved to be beaten,' said Lady Wang tearfully, 'but it is bad for you to get over excited. Besides, you ought to have some consideration for Lady Jia. She is not at all well in this frightful heat. It may not seem to you of much consequence to kill Bao-yu, but think what the effect would be on *her.'*

'Don't try that sort of talk with me!' said Jia Zheng bitterly. 'Merely by fathering a monster like this I have proved myself an unfilial son; yet whenever in the past I have tried to discipline him, the rest of you have all conspired against me to protect him. Now that I have the opportunity at last, I may as well finish off what I have begun and put him down, like the vermin he is, before he can do any more damage.'

So saying, he took up a rope and would have put his threat into execution, had not Lady Wang held her arms around him to prevent it.

'Of course you should discipline your son,' she said, weeping, 'but you have a wife too, Sir Zheng, don't forget. I am nearly fifty now and this wretched boy is the only son I have. If you insist on making an example of him, I dare not do much to dissuade you. But to kill him outright that is deliberately to make me childless. Better strangle me first, if you are going to strangle him. Let the two of us die together. At least I shall have some support then in the world to come, if all support in this world is to be denied me!'

With these words she threw herself upon Bao-yu's body and, lifting up her voice, began weeping with noisy abandon. Jia Zheng, who had heard her with a sigh, sank into a chair and himself broke down in a fit of weeping.

Presently Lady Wang began to examine the body she was clasping. Bao-yu's face was ashen, his breathing was scarcely perceptible, and the trousers of thin **green** silk which clothed the lower part of his body were so soaked with blood that their colour was no longer recognizable. Feverishly she unfastened his waistband and drew them back. Everywhere, from the upper part of his buttocks down to his calves, was either raw and bloody or purplish black with bruises. Not an inch of sound flesh was to be seen. The sight made her cry out involuntarily.

'Oh my son! My unfortunate son!'

Once more she broke down into uncontrollable weeping.

Her own words reminded her of the son she had already lost, and now, with added bitterness, she began to call out his name.

‘Oh, Zhu! Zhu! If only you had lived, I shouldn’t have minded losing a *hundred* other sons!’

By this time news of Lady Wang’s *demarche* had circulated to the other members of the inner mansion and Li Wan, Xi-feng, Ying-chun, Tan-chun and Xi-chun had come to join her. The invocation of her dead husband’s name, painful to all of them, was altogether too much for Li Wan, who broke into loud sobs on hearing it. Jia Zheng himself was deeply affected, and tears as round as pumpkins rolled down both his cheeks. It was beginning to look as if they might all go on weeping there indefinitely, since no one would make a move; but just then there was a cry of ‘Her Old Ladyship—!’ from one of the maids, interrupted by a quavering voice outside the window.

‘Kill me first! You may as well kill both of us while you are about it!’

As much distressed by his mother’s words as he was alarmed by her arrival, Jia Zheng hurried out to meet her, She was leaning on the shoulder of a little maid, her old head swaying from side to side with the effort of running, and panting as she ran.

Jia Zheng bowed down before her and his face assumed the semblance of a smile.

‘Surely, Mother, in such hot weather as this there is no need for you to come here ? If you have any instructions, you should call for me and let *me* come *to you.’*

Grandmother Jia had stopped when- she heard this voice -and now stood panting for some moments while she regained her breath. When she spoke, her voice had an unnatural shrillness in it.

‘Oh! Are you speaking to *me?*—Yes, as a matter of fact I *have* got instructions”, as you put it; but as unfortunately I’ve never had a good son who cares for me, there’s no one I can give them to.’

Wounded in his most sensitive spot, Jia Zheng fell on his knees before her The voice in which he replied to her was broken with tears.

‘How can I bear it, Mother, if you speak to me like that? What I did to the boy I did for the honour of the family.’

Grandmother Jia spat contemptuously.

‘A single harsh word from me and you start whining that you can’t bear it. How do you think Bao-yu could bear your cruel rod? And you say you’ve been punishing him for the honour of the family, but you just tell me this: did your own father ever punish yon in such a way? I think not.’

She was weeping now herself.

‘Don’t upset yourself, Mother,’ said Jia Zheng, with the same forced smile. ‘I acted too hastily. From now on I’ll never beat him again, if that’s what you wish.’

‘Hoity-toity, keep your temper!’ said Grandmother Jia. ‘He’s your son. If you want to beat him, that’s up to you. If we women are in your way, we’ll leave you alone to get on with it.’ She turned to her attendants. ‘Call my carriage. Your Mistress and I and Bao-you are going back to Nanking. We shall be leaving immediately.’

The -servants made a show of compliance.

‘No need for you to cry,’ she said, turning to Lady Wang. ‘You love Bao-yu now that he’s young, but when he’s grown up and become an important official, he’ll like enough forget that you’re his mother. Much better force yourself not to love him now and save yourself some anguish later on.’

Jia Zheng threw himself forward on his face.

‘Don’t say that, Mother! Don’t reject your own son!

‘On the contrary,’ said Grandmother Jia, ‘it is *you* who have rejected *me*’. But don’t worry. When I have gone back to Nanking, there will be no one here to stop you. You can beat away to your heart’s content.’ She turned to the servants.

‘Come on, hurry up with that packing! And get the carriage and horses ready so that we can be on our way.

Jia Zheng’s kotows were by now describing the whole quarter circle from perpendicular to ground. But the old lady walked on inside, ignoring him.

From the sight that met her eyes she could tell that this had been no ordinary beating. It filled her with anguish for the sufferer and fresh anger for the man who had inflicted it, and for a long time she clung to the inert form and wept, only gradually calming down under the combined coaxing of Lady Wang, Xi-feng and Li Wan.

At this point several of the maids and women servants came forward and attempted to raise Bao-yu to his feet.

‘Idiots!’ said Xi-feng. ‘Haven’t you got eyes in your heads? Can’t you *see* that he’s in no fit state to walk? Go and get that wicker summer-bed from inside and carry him in on that.’

The servants rushed out and presently reappeared carrying a long, narrow couch of woven rattan between them, on to which they lifted Bao-yu. Then, with Grandmother Jia, Lady Wang and the rest of the womenfolk leading the way, they carried him to Grandmother Jia’s apartment and set him down inside it.

Jia Zheng, conscious that his mother’s wrath against him had not abated and unwilling to leave things where they stood, had followed the little procession inside. His eyes travelled from Bao-yu, who, he now saw, really *had* been beaten very badly, to Lady Wang. She was sobbing bitterly, interspersing her sobs with cries of ‘My child!’ and ‘My son!’. Presently she broke off and began railing at the object of her sorrow: ‘Why couldn’t you have died instead of Zhu? Zhu wouldn’t have made his father angry the way you do and I should have been spared this constant anxiety. What is to become of me *if you* go away and leave me, too?’ Then, with a cry of ‘Poor, worthless boy!’, she fell once more to weeping. When Jia Zheng heard this, his own heart was softened and he began to wish that he had not beaten the boy quite so savagely. He tried to find words of comfort for his old mother, but she answered him tearfully.

> ‘A father *ought* to punish his son if he’s done wrong, but not like that!—Why don’t you go now? Won’t you be content until you’ve seen the boy die under your own eyes?’

Jia Zheng, with flustered deference, withdrew.

> By now Aunt Xue, Bao-chai, Caltrop, Aroma and Shi Xiang-yun were there too. Aroma was deeply distressed, but could not show the extent of her feelings in the presence of so many others. Indeed, Bao-yu was so ringed around with people fanning him or forcing water through his lips that there was nothing she could have done for him if she had tried. Feeling somewhat superfluous, she left the apartment and went out to the inner gate, where she asked the pages to look for Tealeaf, so that she could find out what had happened.

‘Why did the Master suddenly beat him like that?’ she asked Tealeaf when he arrived. ‘He hadn’t been doing anything. And why couldn’t you have warned us in time?’

Tealeaf was indignant.

‘I couldn’t help it, I wasn’t *there*. He was half-way through eating *him* before I even got to hear about it. I did my best to find out the reason, though. It seems that there were two things the Master was upset about: one was to do with Bijou and the ether was to do with Golden.’

‘How did the Master get to know about them?’ said Aroma. ‘Well, the Bijou business he probably knew about indirectly through Mr Xue,’ said Tealeaf. ‘Mr Xue had been feeling very jealous, and it looks as though he may have put someone else up to telling the Master about it out of spite. And Golden he probably heard about from Master Huan leastways, that’s what the Master’s own people told me.’

The two reasons Tealeaf had given corresponded well enough with Aroma’s own observations, and she was

more than half inclined to believe them. Fairly confident, therefore, that she now knew the cause of -what had happened, she returned once more to the apartment. The ministrations of those surrounding Bao-yu had by now restored him to fall consciousness, and Grandmother Jia was instructing the servants to carry him back to his own room. There was an answering cry and something of a scramble as many willing hands lifted up the cane bed. Then, preceded as before by Grandmother Jia, Lady Wang and the rest, they carried him through into the Garden and back to **Green** Delights, where they finally got him on to his own bed. After a good deal more bustle they gradually all drifted away and Aroma at last had Bao-yu alone to herself.

But in order to know what happened then, you must refer to the following chapter.

CHAPTER 34

A wordless message meets with silent understanding
And a groundless imputation leads to undeserved rebukes

WHEN she saw that Grandmother Jia, Lady Wang and the rest had all gone, Aroma went and sat down at Bao-yu's bedside and asked him, with tears in her eyes, the reason why he had been beaten so severely.

Bao-yu sighed.

'Oh, the usual things. Need you ask? I wish you'd take a look down below, though, and tell me if anything's broken. It's hurting so dreadfully down there.'

Very gently Aroma inserted her fingers into the top of his trousers and began to draw them off. She had barely started when he gritted his teeth and let out a cry, and she had to stop immediately. This happened three or four times before she finally succeeded in getting them off. The sight revealed made her grit her own teeth.

'Mother of mine!' she gasped, 'he must have hit you savagely. If only you'd listened to me a bit in the past, it would never have come to *this.* Why, you might have been crippled for life. It doesn't bear thinking of.'

Just then Bad-chai's arrival was announced by one of the maids. Since putting his trousers on again was out of the question, Aroma snatched up a lightweight coverlet and hurriedly threw it over him. Bao-chai came in carrying a large tablet of some sort of solid medicine which she instructed Aroma to pound up in wine and apply to Bao-yu's injuries in the evening.

'This is a decongestant,' she said, handing it to her. 'It will take away the inflammation by dispersing the bad blood in his bruises. After that, he should heal quite quickly.'

She turned to Bao-yu.

'Are you feeling any better now?'

Bao-yu thanked her. Yes, he said, he was feeling a little better, and invited her to sit down beside him. Bao-chai was relieved to see him with his eyes open and talking again. She shook her head sadly.

'If you had listened to what one said, this would never have happened. Everyone is so upset now. It isn't only Grand-mother and Lady Wang, you know. Even—'

She checked herself abruptly, regretting that she had allowed her feelings to run away with her, and lowered her head, blushing. Bao-yu d sensed hidden depths of feeling in the passionate earnestness of her tone, and when she suddenly faltered and turned **red,** there was something so touching about the pretty air of confusion with which she dropped her head and played with the ends of her girdle, that his spirits soared and his pain was momentarily forgotten.

‘What have I undergone but a few whacks of the bamboo?’ he thought, ‘—yet already they are so sad and concerned about me! What dear, adorable, sweet, noble girls they are! Heaven knows how they would grieve for me if I were actually to die! It would be almost worth dying, just to find Out. The loss of a life’s ambitions would be a small price to pay, and I should be a peevish, ungrateful ghost if I did not feel proud and happy when such darling creatures were grieving for me.’

He was roused from this reverie by the sound of Bao-chai’s voice asking Aroma what it was that had moved his father to such violent anger against him. Aroma’s low reply, in which she merely repeated what Tealeaf had told her, was his first inkling of the part that Jia Huan had played in his misfortune. Her mention of Xue Pan’s involvement, however, made him apprehensive that Bao-chai might feel embarrassed, and he hastily interrupted Aroma to prevent her from saying more.

Old Xue would never do a thing like that,’ he said. ‘It’s silly to make these wild assertions.’

Bao-chai knew that it was out of respect for her feelings that he was silencing Aroma, and she wondered at his considerateness.

‘What delicacy of feeling!’ she thought, ‘after so terrible a beating and in spite of all the pain, to be still able to worry about the possibility of someone else’s being offended! If only you could apply some of that thoughtfulness to the more important things of life, my friend, you would make my Uncle so happy; and then perhaps these awful things would never happen. And when all’s said and done, this sensibility on my behalf is rather wasted. Do you *really* think I know my own brother so little that I am unaware of his unruly nature? Nothing has ever been allowed to stand in the way of Pan’s desires. Look at the terrible trouble he made for you that time over Qin Zhong. That was a long time ago, and I am sure he has got much worse since then.’

Those were her thoughts, but what she said was:

‘There’s really no need to look around for someone to blame. If you ask me, the mere fact that Cousin Bao has been willing to keep such company was in itself quite enough to make Uncle angry. And though my brother can be very tactless and may well have let something out about Cousin Bao in the course of conversation, I’m sure it wouldn’t have been deliberate trouble-making on his part. In the first place, it is, after all, true, what he is supposed to have said: Cousin Bao *has* been going around with that actor. And in the second place, my brother simply hasn’t got it in him to be discreet. You have lived all your life with sensitive, considerate people like Cousin Bao, my dear Aroma. You have never had to deal with a crude, forthright person like my brother someone who says whatever comes into his head with complete disregard for the consequences.’

When Bao-yu cut short her remarks about Xue Pan, Aroma had realized at once that she was being tactless and inwardly prayed that Bao-chai had not taken exception to them. To her, therefore, these words of Bao-chai’s were a source of tongue-tied embarrassment. Bao-yu, on the other hand, could see in them only the refusal of a frank and generous nature to admit deviousness in others and a sensibility capable of matching and responding to his own. As a consequence his spirits soared yet higher. He was about to say something, but Bao-chai rose to her feet and anticipated him.

‘I’ll come and see you again tomorrow. You must rest now and give yourself a chance to get well. I’ve given Aroma something to make a lotion with. Get her to put it on for you in the evening. I can guarantee that it will hasten your recovery.’

She was moving towards the door as she said this. When she was outside, Aroma hurried after her to see her off and to thank her for her trouble.

‘As soon as he’s better,’ she said, ‘Master Bao will come over and thank you himself, Miss.’

‘It’s nothing at all,’ said Bao-chai, turning back to her with a smile. ‘Do tell him to rest properly, though,

and -not to brood. And if there's anything at all he wants, just quietly come round to my place for it. Don't go bothering Lady Jia or Lady Wang or any of the others, in case my uncle gets to hear of it. It probably wouldn't matter at the time, but it might do later on, next time there is any trouble.'

With that she left, and Aroma turned back into the courtyard, her heart full of gratitude for Bao-chai's kindness. Reentering Bao-yu's room, she found him lying back quietly, plunged in thought. From the look of it, he was already half asleep. Tiptoeing out again, she went off to wash her hair.

But it was difficult for Bao-yu to lie quietly for very long. The pain in his buttocks was like the stabbing and pricking of knives and needles and there was a burning sensation in them as if he were being grilled over a fire, so that the slightest movement made him cry out. Already it was growing late. Aroma appeared to have gone away, but two or three maids were still in attendance. As there was nothing that they could do for him, he told them that they might go off and prepare themselves for the night, provided that they remained within call. The maids accordingly withdrew, leaving him on his own.

He had dozed off. The shadowy form of Jiang Yu-han had come in to tell him of his capture by the Prince of Zhong-shun's men, followed, shortly after, by Golden, who gave him a tearful account of how she had drowned herself. In his half dream, half-awake state he was having the greatest difficulty in attending to what they were saying, when suddenly he felt someone pushing him and became dimly aware of a sound of weeping in his ear. He gave a start. Fully awake now, he opened his eyes. It was Lin Dai-yu. Suspecting this, too, to be a dream, he raised his head to look. A pair of eyes swollen like peaches met his own, and a face that was glistening with tears. It was Dai-yu all right, no doubt about that. He would have looked longer, but the strain of raising himself was causing such excruciating pain in his nether parts, that he fell back again with a groan. The groan was followed by a sigh.

'Now what have you come for?' he said. 'The sun's not long set and the ground must still be very hot underfoot. You could still get a heat-stroke at this time of day, and that would he a fine how-do-you-do. Actually, in spite of the beating, I don't feel very much pain. This fuss I make is put on to fool the others. I'm hoping they'll spread the word around outside how badly I've been hurt, so that Father gets to hear of it. It's all shamming, really. You mustn't be taken in by it.'

Dai-yu's sobbing had by this time ceased to be audible; but somehow her strangled, silent weeping was infinitely more pathetic than the most clamorous grief. At that moment volumes would have been inadequate to contain the things she wanted to say to him; yet all she could get out, after struggling for some time with her choking sobs, was

'I suppose you'll change now.'

Bao-yu gave a long sigh.

'Don't worry, I shan't change. People like that are worth dying for. I wouldn't change if he killed me.'

The words were scarcely out of his mouth when they heard someone outside in the courtyard saying:

'Mrs Lian has come.'

Dai-yu had no wish to see Xi-feng, and rose to her feet hurriedly.

Bao-yu seized hold of her hand.

'Now that's funny. Why should you start being afraid of *her* all of a sudden?'

She stamped with impatience.

'Look at the state my eyes are in I' she said. 'I don't want them all making fun of me again.'

At that Bao-yu released her hand and she bounded round to the back of the bed, slipping into the rear courtyard just as Xi-feng was entering the room from the front.

‘A bit better now?’ said Xi-feng. ‘Is there anything you feel like eating yet? If there is, tell them to come round to my place and get it.’

As soon as Xi-feng had gone, Bao-yu was visited by Aunt Xue, and shortly after that by someone whom his grand-mother had sent to see how he was getting on. At lighting-up time, after taking a few mouthfuls of soup, he settled down into a fitful sleep.

Just then a new group of visitors arrived, consisting of Zhou Rui’s wife, Wu Xin-deng’s wife, Zheng Hao-shi’s wife, and those other members of the mansion’s female staff who had had most to do with Bao-yu in the past and who, having heard of his beating, were anxious to see how he was. Aroma came out smiling on to the verandah to welcome them.

‘You’re just too late to see him, ladies,’ she told them in a low voice. ‘He’s just this minute dropped off.’

She ushered them into the Outer room, invited them to be seated, and served them with tea. After sitting there very quietly for several minutes, they got up to take their leave, requesting Aroma as they did so that she would inform Bao-yu when he waked that they had been round to ask about him. Aroma promised to do so and showed them out. Just as she was about to go in again, an old woman arrived from Lady Wang’s to say that ‘Her Ladyship would like to see one of Master Bao’s people.’ After reflecting for a moment, Aroma turned to the house and called softly to Skybright, Musk and Ripple inside.

‘Her Ladyship wants to see someone, so I’m going over. Stay indoors and keep an eye on things while I’m away. I shan’t be long.’

Then she followed the old woman out of the Garden and round to Lady Wang’s apartment in the central courtyard. She found Lady Wang sitting on a cane summer-bed and fanning herself with a palm leaf fan. She appeared not entirely pleased when she saw that it was Aroma.

‘You could have sent one of the others,’ she said. ‘There was no need for you to come and leave him unattended.’

Aroma smiled reassuringly.

‘Master Bao has just settled down for the night, Madam. If he *should* want anything, the others are nowadays quite capable of looking after him on their own. Your Ladyship has no need to worry. I thought I had better come myself and not send one of the others, in case Your Ladyship had something important to tell us. I was afraid that if I sent one of the others, they might not understand what you wanted.’

‘I have nothing in particular to tell you,’ said Lady Wang. ‘I merely wanted to ask about my son. How is the pain now?’

‘Much better since I put on some of the lotion that Miss Bao brought for him,’ said Aroma. ‘It was so bad before that he couldn’t lie still, but now he’s sleeping quite soundly, so you can tell it must be better than it was.’

‘Has he had anything to eat yet?’ said Lady Wang.

‘He had a few sips of some soup Her Old Ladyship sent,’ said Aroma, ‘but that’s all he would take. He kept complaining that he felt dry. He wanted me to give him plum bitters to drink, but of course that’s an astringent, and I thought to myself that as he’d just had a beating and not been allowed to cry out during it, a lot of hot blood and hot poison must have been driven inwards and still be collected round his heart, and if he were to drink some of that stuff, it might stir them up and bring on a serious illness, so I talked him out of it. After a lot of persuading, I got him to take some rose syrup instead, that I mixed up in water for him; but after only half a cup of it he said it tasted sickly and he couldn’t get it down.’

‘Oh dear, I wish you’d told me sooner,’ said Lady Wang. ‘We were sent some bottles of flavouring the other day that I could have let you have. As a matter of fact I *was* going to send him some of them, but then I

thought that if I did they would probably only get wasted, so I didn't. If he can't manage the rose syrup, I can easily give you a few of them to take back with you. You need only mix a teaspoonful of essence in a cupful of water. The flavours are quite delicious.' She called Suncloud to her. 'Fetch me a few of those bottles of flavouring essence that were sent us the other day.'

'Two will be enough,' said Aroma, 'otherwise it will only get wasted. If we run Out, I can always come back for more later.'

Suncloud was gone for a considerable time. Eventually she returned with two little glass bottles, each about three inches high, which she handed to Aroma. They had screw on silver tops and **yellow** labels. One of-them was labelled 'Essence of Cassia Flower' and the other one 'Essence of Roses'.

'What tiny little bottles!' said Aroma. 'They can't hold very much. I suppose the stuff inside them must be very precious.'

'It was made specially for the Emperor,' said Lady Wang. 'That's what the **yellow** labels mean. Haven't you seen labels like that before? Mind you look after them and don't let the stuff in them get wasted.'

Aroma promised -to be careful and began to go.

'Just a minute!' said Lady Wang. 'I've thought of some-thing else that I wanted to ask you.'

Aroma returned. Lady Wang first glanced about her to make sure that no one else was in the room, then she said:

'I think I heard someone say that Bao-yu's beating today was because of something that Huan had said to Sir Zheng. I suppose you don't happen to have heard anything about that?'

'No. I haven't heard anything about that,' said Aroma. 'What *I* heard was that it was because Master Bao had been going around with one of Prince Somebody or other's players and the Master was told about it by someone who called.'

Lady Wang nodded her head mysteriously.

'Yes, that was one of the reasons. But -there was another reason as well.'

'I really know nothing about any other reason, Your Ladyship,' said Aroma. She dropped her head and hesitated a moment before going on. 'I wonder if I might be rather bold and say something very outspoken to Your Ladyship? Really and truly ' She faltered.

'Please go on.'

'I will if Your Ladyship will promise not to he angry with me.'

'That's all right,' said Lady Wang. 'Just tell me what you have to say.'

'Well, really and truly,' said Aroma, 'Master Bao *needed* punishing. If the Master didn't keep an eye on him, there's no knowing *what* he mightn't get up to.'

'My child,' said Lady Wang with a warmth rarely seen in her, 'those are exactly my own sentiments. How clever of you to have understood! Of course, I know perfectly well that Bao-yu is in need of discipline; and anyone who saw how strict I used to be with Mr Zhu would realize that I am capable of exercising it. But I have my reasons. A woman of fifty cannot expect to bear any more children and Bao-yu is now the only son I have. He is not a very strong boy; and his Grannie dotes on him. I daren't *risk* being strict. I daren't risk losing another son. I daren't risk angering Her Old Ladyship and upsetting the whole household. I do once in a while have it out with him but though I have argued and pleaded and wept, it doesn't do any good. He *seems* all right at the time, but he'll be just the same again a short while afterwards and I always know that I have failed to reach him. Jam afraid *he has* to suffer before he can learn but suppose it's too much for him? suppose he doesn't get over *this* beating? What will become of *me?*'

She began to cry.

Seeing her mistress so distressed, Aroma herself was affected and began to cry too.

'I can understand Your Ladyship being so upset,' she said, 'when he's your own son. Even we servants that have been with him for a few years get worried about him. The most that we can ever hope for is to do our duty and get by without too much trouble but even *that* won't be possible if he goes on the way he has been doing. I'm always telling him to change his ways. Every day every hour I tell him. But it's no use; he won't listen. Of course, if these people *will* make so much fuss of him, you can hardly blame him for going round with them though it does make our job more difficult. But now that Your Ladyship has spoken like this, it puts me in mind of something that's been worrying me which I should like to have asked Your Ladyship's advice about, only I was afraid you might take it amiss, and then not only should I have spoken to no purpose, but I should leave myself without even a grave to lie in...'

It was evident to Lady Wang that what she was struggling to get out was a matter of some consequence.

'What is it you want to tell me, my child?' she said kindly. 'I've heard a lot of people praising you recently, and I confess that I assumed it must be because you took special pains in serving Bao-yu or in making yourself agreeable to other people—little things of that sort. But I see that I was wrong. These are not at all little things that you have been talking about. What you have said so far makes very good sense and entirely accords with my own opinion of the matter. So if you have anything to tell me, I should like to hear it. But I must ask you not to discuss it with anyone else.'

'All I really wanted to ask,' said Aroma, 'was if Your Ladyship could advise me how later on we can somehow or other contrive to get Master Bao moved back outside the Garden,'

Lady Wang looked startled and clutched Aroma's hand in some alarm.

'I hope Bao-yu hasn't been doing something dreadful with one of the girls?'

'Oh no, Your Ladyship, please don't suspect that!' said Aroma hurriedly. 'That wasn't my meaning at all. It's just that—if you'll allow me to say so—Master Bao and the young ladies are beginning to grow up now, and though they are all cousins, there is the difference of sex between them, which makes it very awkward sometimes when they are all living together, especially in the case of Miss Lin and Miss Bao, who aren't even of the same clan. One can't help feeling uneasy. Even to outsiders it looks like a very strange sort of family. They say "where nothing happens, imagination is busiest", and I'm sure lots of unaccountable misfortunes begin when some innocent little thing we did unthinkingly 'gets misconstrued in someone else's imagination and reported as something terrible. We just have to be on our guard against that sort of thing happening especially when Master Bao has such a peculiar character, as Your Ladyship knows, and spends all his time with girls. He only has to make the tiniest slip in an unguarded moment, and whether he really did anything or not, with so many people about and some of them no better than they should be there is sure to be scandal. For you know what some of these people are like, Your Ladyship. If they feel well-disposed towards you, they'll make you out to be a saint; but if they're not, then Heaven help you! If Master Bao lives to be spoken well of' we can count ourselves lucky; but the way things are, it only needs someone to breathe a word of scandal and - I say nothing of what will happen to us servants—it's of no consequence if we're all chopped up for mincemeat—but what's more important, Master Bao's reputation will be destroyed for life and all the care and worry Your Ladyship and Sir Zheng have had on his account will have been wasted. I know Your Ladyship is very busy and can't be expected to think of everything, and I probably shouldn't have thought of this myself, but once I *had* thought of it, it seemed to me that it would be wrong of me not to tell Your Ladyship, and it's been preying on my mind ever since. The only reason I haven't mentioned it before is because I was afraid Your Ladyship might be angry with

me.'

What Aroma had lust been saying about misconstructions and scandals so exactly fitted what had in fact happened in the case of Golden that for a moment Lady Wang was quite taken aback. But on reflection she felt nothing but love and gratitude for this humble servant-girl who had shown so much solicitude on her behalf.

'It is very perceptive of you, my dear, to have thought it all out so carefully,' she said. 'I have, of course, thought about this matter myself' but other things have put it from my mind, and what you have just said has reminded me. It is most thoughtful of you. You are a very, very good girl—Well, you may go now. I think I now know what to do. There is just one thing before you go, though. Now that you have spoken to me like this, I am going to place Bao-yu entirely in your hands. Be very careful with him, won't you? Remember that anything you do for him you will be doing also for me. You will find that I am not ungrateful.'

Aroma stood for a moment with bowed head, weighing the import of these words. Then she said:

'I will do what Your Ladyship has asked me to the utmost of my ability'

She left the apartment slowly and made her way back to **Green** Delights, pondering -as she went. When she arrived, Bao-yu had just woken up, so she told him about the flavourings. He was pleased and made her mix some for him straight away. It was quite delicious. He kept thinking about Dai-yu and wanted to send someone over to see her, but he was afraid that Aroma would disapprove, so, as a means of getting her Out of the way?, he sent her over to Bao-chai's place to borrow a book. As soon as she had gone, he summoned Skybright.

'I want you to go to Miss Lin's for me,' he said. 'just see what she's doing, and if she asks about me, tell her I'm all right.'

'I can't go rushing in there bald-headed without a reason,' said Skybright. 'You'd better give me *some* kind of a message, just to give me an excuse for going there.'

'I have none to give,' said Bao-yu.

'Well, give me something to take, then,' said Skybright, 'or think of something I can ask her for. Otherwise it will look so silly.'

Bao-yu thought for a bit and then, reaching out and picking up two of his old handkerchiefs, he tossed them towards her with a smile.

'All right. Tell her I said you were to give her these.'

'That's an odd sort of present!' said Skybright. 'What's she going to do with a pair of your old handkerchiefs? Most likely she'll think you're making-fun of her and get upset again.'

'No she won't,' said Bao-yu. 'She'll understand.'

Skybright-deemed it pointless to argue, so she picked up the handkerchiefs and went off to the Naiad's House. Little Delicate, who was hanging some towels out to dry on the verandah railings, saw her enter the courtyard and attempted to wave her away.

'She's gone to bed.'

Skybright ignored her and went on inside. The lamps had not been lit and the room was in almost total darkness. The voice of Dai-yu, lying awake in bed, spoke to her out of the shadows.

'Who is it?'

'Skybright.'

'What do you want?'

'Master Bao has sent me with some handkerchiefs, Miss?

Dai-yu seemed to hesitate. She -found the gift puzzling and was wondering what it could mean.

‘I suppose they must be very good ones,’ she said. ‘Probably someone gave them to him. Tell him to keep them and give them to some body else. I have no use for them just now myself.’

Skybright laughed.

‘They’re not new ones, Miss. They’re two of his did, everyday ones.’

This was even more puzzling. Dai-yu thought very hard for some moments. Then suddenly, in a flash, she understood.

‘Put them down. You may go now.’

Skybright did as she was bid and withdrew. All the way back to **Green** Delights she tried to make sense of what had happened, but it continued to mystify her.

Meanwhile the message that eluded Skybright had thrown Dai-yu into a turmoil of conflicting emotions.

‘I feel so happy,’ she thought, ‘that in the midst of his own affliction he has been able to grasp the cause of all my trouble.

‘And yet at the same time I am sad,’ she thought; ‘because how do I know that my trouble will end in the way I want it to?

‘Actually, I feel rather amused,’ she thought. ‘Fancy his sending a pair of old handkerchiefs like that! Suppose I hadn’t understood what he was getting at?

‘But I feel alarmed that he should be sending presents to me in secret.

‘Oh, and I feel so ashamed when I think how I am forever crying and quarrelling,’ she thought, ‘and all the time he has understood! …’

And her thoughts carried her this way and that, until the ferment of excitement within her cried out to be expressed. Careless of what the maids might think, she called for a lamp, sat herself down at her desk, ground some ink, softened her brush, and proceeded to compose the following quatrains, using the handkerchiefs them-selves to write on:

1

Seeing my idle teats, you ask me why
These foolish drops fall from my teeming eye:
Then know, your gift, being by the merfolk made,
In merman’s currency must be repaid.

2

Jewelled drops by day in secret sorrow shed
Or, in the night-time, in my wakeful bed,
Lest sleeve or pillow they should spot or stain,
Shall on these gifts shower down their salty rain.

3

Yet silk preserves but ill the Naiad’s tears:
Each salty trace of them fast disappears.
Only the speckled bamboo stems that grow
Outside the window still her tear marks show.

She had only half-filled the second handkerchief and was preparing to write another quatrain, when she became aware that her whole body was burning hot all over and her cheeks were afire. Going over to the dressing table, she removed the brocade cover from the mirror and peered into it.

'Hmn! "Brighter than the peach-flower's hue",' she murmured complacently to the flushed face that stared out at her from the glass, and, little imagining that what she had been witnessing was the first symptom of a serious illness, went back to bed, her mind full of handkerchiefs.

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From Dai-yu and her handkerchiefs let us return to Aroma, who, it will be remembered, bad been sent off to Bao-chai's for a book. When she got there, she found that Bao-chai was not in the Garden, having gone round to her mother's place outside. Not liking to return empty-handed, she waited for Bao-chai to return. It was already the beginning of the first watch when she did so.

Knowing her brother as she did, Bao-chai had already, even before hearing anything to that effect, suspected that he was in some way responsible for Bao-yu's misfortune. What Aroma had earlier on told her had therefore been no more than confirmation of an already existing suspicion. Yet Aroma had only been echoing what Tealeaf had told *her;* and what Tealeaf had told her was pure guesswork without a shred of evidence to support it. Thus what started in everyone's mind as a suspicion, repetition very soon compounded into a certainty. Yet the ironical fact was that he who by his past behaviour had so richly merited the reputation which had caused them to suspect him was totally innocent on the one Occasion when everyone was most unshakeably convinced of his guilt.

The object of this misunderstanding had on this particular evening returned home having had a good deal to drink outside. He greeted his mother and then, observing that his sister, too, was sitting there, addressed a few desultory remarks to her. Suddenly he seemed to remember something.

'I hear young Bao-yu's been in trouble,' he said. 'What was it about?'

This was too much for Aunt Xue, who had been seething inwardly and now broke out in a fury.

'Shameless villain! How can you have the face to ask such a question? You know very well it was all your doing?

Xue Pan stared at her in astonishment.

'What do you mean, "all my doing"?'

'Don't act the injured innocent with me!' said his mother. 'Everyone knows it was you who told.'

'Oh, and I suppose if everyone said I'd killed somebody, you'd believe that too!'

'Even your sister knows it was you. I suppose you're not going to call *her* a liar?'

Bao-chai hurriedly intervened.

'Don't shout so, both of you! If you'd be a bit more -calm and collected, you might have some chance of getting at the truth.' She turned to Xue Pan: 'Anyway, whether it was you or *wasn't* you, the damage is done now. There doesn't seem much point in raking it over or making an issue of it. My advice to you is to keep out of mischief from now on and stop interfering in other people's affairs. When you spend day after day fooling around outside, sooner or later something is *bound* to happen; and you are such a thoughtless creature, that when it does, people naturally suspect that you are the one to blame, even if you aren't. I know *I* do!'

Xue Pan, for all his faults, was a forthright, outspoken sort of fellow, unused to such ostrich-like avoidance of the issue. Bao-chai's strictures about fooling around' and his mother's insistence that he had brought about Bao-yu's beating by means of a deliberate indiscretion had exasperated him beyond endurance. He jumped about excitedly, protesting with the most solemn and desperate oaths that he was innocent.

'I'd like to find the comedian who's been making up these stories about me,' he shouted, turning in anger upon the domestics. 'I'll smash his rotten face in if I do. Of course, I know what this is all about: you all want to show how concerned you are for poor, darling Bao-yu, so you've decided to do it at my expense. What is he, anyway? a Deva King? Every time his dad gives him a few whacks on the bum, the whole household is in a state of uproar about it for days on end. I remember that time Uncle Zheng beat him for doing something he shouldn't have and old Lady Jia decided that Cousin Zhen was at the bottom of it. She had the poor so-and-so hauled up in front of her and there was hell to pay. Now, this time, you want to drag *me* into it. All right then I don't care. A life for a life. I'll go in there and kill the little blighter then you can all do what you like to me.'

In the midst of this bawling he had picked up a door bar and was evidently going off to execute his threat; but his distraught mother clung to him and prevented him from going.

'You stupid creature!' she said. 'Who do you think you're going to hit with that? If you're going to hit anyone, you'd better begin with me!'

Xue Pan's exasperation had now reached such a pitch that his eyes stood out in his head like a pair of copper bells.

'This is rich!' he shouted. 'You won't let me go and finish him off, yet you won't stop provoking me by making up all these lies. Every day that fellow stays alive means one more day of nagging and lies for *me* to put up with. We'd much better die, the pair of us, and make an end of it!'

'Have a little self-control!' said Bao-chai, joining in her mother's efforts to restrain him. 'Can't you see how upset poor Mamma is? You ought to be trying to calm her, not making things worse with this uproar.'

'Oh yes ! *you* can say that now,' said Xue Pan, 'but it was you who started all this by telling her about me, wasn't it?'

'It's all very well to blame me for telling Mamma,' said Bao-chai. 'Why don't you blame yourself for being so careless, you great blabber-mouth ?'

'Me careless ?' said Xue Pan. 'What about the way Bao-yu stirs up trouble for himself then? Let me just give *you* an example. Let me tell you what happened between him and Bijou the other day. I'd met Bijou ten times, near enough, and never had so much as a kind word out of him, yet Bao-yu, that didn't even know him by sight, meets him for the first time the other day, and before you know where you are, he's given him his sash! I hope you're not going to say that *that* got about because of me ?'

His mother and sister were indignant.

'That's a fine example, isn't it? It's precisely because of that that he was beaten. Now we *know* it must have been you who told.'

'This is enough to drive a fellow mad!' said Xue Pan, 'It's not so much the lies you keep telling about me. What really gets my goat is the almighty fuss you make about this fellow Bao-yu.'

'Almighty fuss?' said Bao-chai. 'You've just been waving a door-bar at us, and you say that *we* have been making a fuss ?'

Xue Pan could see that Bao-chai had reason on her side and that she was much harder to argue with than his mother. He was therefore eager to find something that would stop her mouth, so that he could say what he wanted to without contradiction. This, coupled with the fact that be was by now far too angry to weigh the seriousness of

what he was saying, was responsible for the unpardonable innuendo that followed.

'All right, sis,' he said, 'you don't need to quarrel with me. I know what your trouble is. Mamma told me long ago that Mr Right would be someone with a jade to match your locket, so naturally, now you've seen -that blasted thing that Bao-yu wears round his neck, you do all you can to stick up for him.'

Anger at first made Bao-chai speechless; then, clinging to Aunt Xue, she burst into tears.

'Mamma, listen to what Pan is saying to me!

Realizing, when he saw his sister's tears, that he had gone too far, Xue Pan retired sulkily to his own room and went to bed; Bao-chai was left bursting with injury and outrage which she dared not express for fear of further upsetting her mother. She was obliged to bid the latter a tearful goodnight and go back to her own room in the Garden, where she spent the rest of the night weeping.

She was up early next morning. Too dispirited to make a proper toilet, she stopped only to tidy herself a little before setting off for her mother's. On the way she met, of all people, Dai-yu, standing on her own beneath a flowering tree.

'Where are you going?' said Dai-yu.

'To my mother's.' She answered without stopping.

Dai-yu noticed how dispirited she looked and saw that her eyes were swollen as if she had been weeping.

'Don't make yourself ill, coz,' she called out, almost gleefully, to the retreating back. 'Even a cistern full of tears won't heal the smart of a beating!'

The nature of Bao-chai's reply will be revealed in the following chapter.

CHAPTER 35

Sulky Silver tastes some lotus-leaf soup
And Golden Oriole knots a flower-patterned fringe

BAO-CHAI heard Dai-yu's sarcasm-quite clearly, but her mind was too taken up with her own family affairs to pay much attention, and she continued on her way without looking back.

As Dai-yu gazed towards the House of **Green** Delights, which was at some distance from the flowering tree in whose shade she was standing, she presently observed Li Wan, Ying-chun, Tan-chun and Xi-chun, attended by numerous maids, going into the gate of its courtyard. Then, as she continued to watch, she saw them one by one come out again and go their separate ways. it struck her that Xi-feng had not been with them, and she wondered why.

'It's not like her not to visit him,' she thought. Even if she's otherwise engaged, you'd expect her to find some means of getting over and doing her little turn, if only to keep in with Grandma and Auntie Wang. There must be some very pressing reason to keep *her* away.'

She lowered her head to reflect. Raising it again and looking once more in the direction of **Green** Delights, she observed a colourful throng of females just about to enter, and when she looked a little harder, she could make out Wang Xi-feng with Grandmother Jia leaning on her arm. Lady Wang and Lady Xing walked behind them, followed by Aunt Zhou and a large bevy of maids and women servants. As the last of these disappeared inside the gate, Dai-yu nodded wistfully, thinking how good it must be to have a family, and soon her face was once more wet with tears. Presently she saw Aunt Xue and Bao-chai arrive. Not long after she had watched them

enter the gate, Nightingale suddenly walked up behind her.

'Come and have your medicine, Miss,' she said. 'it's cool enough to drink now.'

'What's the matter with you?' said Dai-yu. 'Always fussing! What does it matter to you whether I take my medicine or not?

Nightingale laughed good-humouredly.

'Your cough's only just beginning to get better, and already you want to stop taking your medicine! it may be the fifth month and the weather may be hot, but all the same, you still need to be careful, Come on, you've been standing quite long enough in this early morning damp. You ought to come in now and rest a bit.'

Now that Nightingale's words had recalled her attention to herself, Dai-yu became aware that her legs were in fact rather tired. For a moment or two she appeared rather bewildered, then, taking Nightingale's arm, she slowly made her way back to the Naiad's House.

As they entered the courtyard, the chequered shadows of the bamboos and the dew-pearled moss reminded her of two lines she had read in *The Western Chamber:*

A place remote, where footsteps seldom pass,
And dew still glistens on the untrodden grass.

'It's all very well,' she thought, as she reflected oh the heroine of that play, 'Ying-ying may have been unfortunate, but at least she had a widowed mother and a little brother. I have no one.'

She was about to shed tears once more; but just then her parrot, which had been perched aloft under the verandah eaves, seeing that his mistress had returned, flew down with a sudden squawk that made her jump.

'Wicked Polly!' she said. 'You've shaken dust all over my head!'

The parrot flew on to its perch.

'Snowgoose!' it called. 'Raise the blind! Miss Lin is back!'

Dai-yu stooped in front of it and tapped its perch.

'Did they remember your food and water, Polly ?'

The parrot heaved a long sigh, uncannily like the ones that Dai-yu was wont to utter, and recited, in its parroty voice:

Let others laugh flower-burial to see:
Another year who will be burying me?'

Dai-yu and Nightingale both burst out laughing.

'It's what you're always reciting yourself, Miss,' said Nightingale. 'Fancy Polly being able to remember it!,

Dai-yu made her take the perch down and hang it up outside the round 'moon-window' of her study.

Going indoors she sat down by the moon-window to take her medicine. Light reflected from the bamboos outside passed through the gauze of the window to make a **green** gloom within, lending a cold, aquarian look to the floor and the -surfaces of the furniture. To keep her spirits up in these somewhat cheerless surroundings she spoke teasingly to the parrot hanging on the other side of the gauze until he jumped and squawked on his perch, after which she taught him a few snatches of her favourite poems.

At this point our narrative leaves her and returns to Bao-chai.

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When Bao-chai arrived at her mother's apartment that morning, she found her mother still doing her hair. Aunt Xue greeted her daughter with a smile of surprise.

'You're very early this morning, my dear.'

'I wanted to know how you were, Mamma. Did he come in again and give any more trouble after I had left you last night?'

She sat down beside her mother and, in spite of herself, began to cry.

Aunt Xue, seeing her daughter's tears, could not forbear shedding a few herself, though she did her best to comfort her.

'There, there, my child! Don't be upset! I'll deal with that wicked brother of yours, you see if I don't. I don't want anything to happen to my girlie, do I? If anything were to happen to *her*, I should have *no* one to turn to.'

Xue Pan, who had overheard, came running into the room at this point. Clasping his hands together, he pumped them up and down, at the same time making sweeping bows to right and left of him, in token of his contrition.

'Forgive me, sis,' he said. 'I'd had too much to drink last night. I met a friend on my way home. It was already quite late when I bumped into him, and I still hadn't sobered up properly when I got back here. I don't know myself what it was I said, but I know I must have talked a lot of silly nonsense. I'm not surprised you were angry with me.'

The clumsiness of his apology rapidly turned Bao-chai's weeping into laughter. Lifting her face up from the handkerchief in which it had been buried, she made a little grimace of derision.

'There's no need for you to put on this act,' she said 'I understand what your real motive is perfectly well. You don't like having us womenfolk around you and you are looking for a means of getting rid of us, so that you can have the place here to yourself.'

Xue Pan laughed deprecatingly.

'I don't know where you got *that* idea from, sis,' he said. 'It's very unlike you to make a snide remark like that.'

'Snide remark?' said Aunt Xue indignantly. 'If that's a "snide remark", I don't know what sort of remarks you were making to your sister last night. I think you must have taken leave of your senses!'

'Now Mamma, don't be angry,' said Xue Pan, 'and don't you be upset, sis. Suppose I were to tell you that from now on I'm going to give up drinking with the others altogether, eh? What would you say to that?'

'I'd say that you had come to your senses at last,' said Bao-chai.

'And *I'd* say that the Heavenly Dragon had laid an egg,' said Aunt Xue, 'if you really had the will-power to do it.'

'All right then,' said Xue Pan. 'If you ever hear that I've been drinking with those others again, sis, you can spit at me and you can call me a beast and a—and a—*worthless louse!* Dammit, it's too bad that the two of you should be worried all the time because of me! It's bad enough that I should make *you* angry, Mamma; but to have poor little sis, too, worrying her heart out—oh, I really *am* a louse! I ought to be extra good to you, Mamma, now that Father's dead, and extra kind to sis; but instead I make my own dear Mother angry and little sis upset. I'm not a beast, I'm *worse* than a beast I,

And the great booby began to cry.

At this Aunt Xue, who had not been crying when he started, was herself becoming upset, and Bao-chai was obliged to intervene with a brisk cheerfulness that she was very far from feeling.

'Haven't you caused enough trouble already without making Mamma cry again?'

'Who says I've been making Mamma cry?' said Xue Pan, restraining his tears and grinning back at her. 'All right then, all right. Let's drop the whole subject and say no more about it. We'll have Caltrop in and get her to pour you a nice cup of tea.'

'I don t want any tea, thank you,' said Bao-chai. 'As soon as Mamma has washed, I shall be going back into the Garden with her.'

'Let me look at that-locket of yours,' said Xue Pan. 'I-think it needs dipping again.'

'Whatever for?' said Bao-chai. 'The gilding's as bright as new.'

'Isn't it time you had a few more clothes?' said Xue Pan.

'Let me know what colours and what sort of patterns you want.'

'I wouldn't know what to do with them,' said Bao-chai. 'I haven't yet worn all the things I've got.'

Shortly after this exchange Aunt Xue re-emerged from changing her clothes and, taking Bao-chai by the hand, went through into the Garden with her, leaving Xue Pan to go off on his own.

Once in the Garden, Aunt Xue and Bao-chai made their way straight to **Green** Delights. From the large number of maids and older women they found when they got there waiting outside on the verandah or in the ante-room inside, they knew that Grandmother Jia and the other ladies must have arrived there before them. They exchanged greetings with the latter on entering, after which they went over to the couch on which Bao-yu lay, to inquire if he was feeling any better. Seeing Aunt Xue, he attempted to raise himself a little.

'Thank you,' he said, 'I *am* a little better. But what a lot of trouble I am causing! I feel ashamed that you should have come over just to see me.'

Aunt Xue made him lie down again.

'If there's anything you want,' she said, 'do please let me know.'

'I certainly shall,' he said, 'if I can think of anything.'

'Is there anything you fancy to eat?' said Lady Wang. 'We can order it for you when we go back presently.'

'I can't think of anything,' said Bao-yu, 'unless I did quite like that soup we had once with the little lotus-leaves and lotus-pods in it.'

Xi-feng, who was standing by listening, gave a crow of laughter.

'Listen to that, now! What *low* tastes the boy has! What-ever makes you want to eat *that* leathery old stuff ?'

'Have it made, have it made!' said Grandmother Jia vehemently. 'Let the boy have it by all means.'

'Don't be in such a hurry, Grannie!' said Xi-feng laughing. 'I'm trying to think who's got the moulds that they need for making the little shapes with.'

She turned and ordered one of the old women in attendance to go and ask the chief cook; but though the old woman was a long time gone, she came back empty-handed.

'Cook says the four moulds for the soup-shapes were handed in some time ago on your instructions.'

Xi-feng thought for a bit.

'Yes, I remember now: I *did* get them back from her. But I can't remember who I gave them to. I should think the likeliest place for them to be is the tea-room.'

She sent someone to the tea-room stewardess; but she hadn't got them either. In the end they turned out to

be with the plate stewardess, who looked after the gold and silver. Aunt Xue was the first to examine them when they arrived.

There were four moulds fitted into a single box. They were made of silver, a foot or so long and about an inch wide. Along the face of each mould were rows of very finely cut dies, each about the size of a bean, thirty or forty on each mould. On one of the moulds the dies were in the shape of chrysanthemums, on another of plum-flowers, on the third of lotus pods and leaves, and on the remaining one of caltrops. Aunt Xue turned to Grandmother Jia and Lady Wang with amusement.

'You people really do think of *everything!* All these patterns for a bowl of soup! If you hadn't told me, I should never have guessed what these things were for.'

'Xi-feng answered her before either of the older ladies could reply.

'You wouldn't know about these anyway, Aunt. It's something they thought up last year for Her Grace's visit. They cut shapes with these things out of some special dough—I'm not sure exactly what it's made of—and put them in a clear soup. There's supposed to be a suggestion of autumn lotuses in the flavour, but it doesn't taste very much really. It's certainly not the sort of thing you'd want to eat very often. In fact, I think the only time we ever had it was when they made some for the visit. I'm surprised he can still remember.'

She handed the moulds to an attendant woman-servant.

'Tell the kitchen to take as many chickens and other ingredients as they'll need to make ten bowlfuls with. Say it's wanted immediately.'

'Why so much?' said Lady Wang.

'I have my reason,' said Xi-feng. 'This isn't the sort of thing one eats every day, and now that Cousin Bao has mentioned it, it seems silly to make it just for him and not let you and Grandma and Auntie Xue taste it as well. So while we are about it, we might just as well do enough of it for everyone.' She smiled mischievously. 'I might even have a taste of it myself.'

Grandmother Jia laughed.

'Little monkey! We spoil you! Spending public money on private entertainment, that's what this is!'

The others all laughed. Xi-feng, quite unconcerned, joined in.

'That's no problem,' she said. 'I'm sure I can-afford a little treat like this.' She turned to the waiting woman: 'Tell the kitchen to use plenty of everything and charge it all up to my account.'

The woman murmured a reply and went off to see about the order.

Bao-chai had been following these exchanges with amusement.

'Cousin Feng may be very artful,' she said, 'but I don't believe that in all the years I've been here I have ever seen her get the better of Lady Jia.'

'I'm an old woman, my dear,' said Grandmother Jia. 'What use would I have for artfulness at my time of life? Mind you, when I was the age that Feng is now, I could have taught her a thing or two. Still, though she may not be as sharp as I was then, she doesn't do so badly! A deal better than your Aunt Wang here, that's certain. *She* can't talk to save her life, poor soul, no more than a woman of wood! *She* could never get round me the way your Cousin Feng does. Fengie has the gift of a good tongue, my dear. That's why your old grannie is so fond of her.'

Bao-yu laughed.

'From what you say, Grandma, it sounds as if the good talkers are the only ones you can be fond of.'

'Oh no,' said Grandmother Jia. 'the silent ones have their merits, just as the good talkers have theirs. Good talkers can be very tiresome at times and *then* I prefer the silent ones.'

'That's all right then,' said Bao-yu. 'I was going to say: my sister-in-law certainly isn't much of talker, yet

I'm sure you are as fond of her as you are of Feng. If being a good talker were the only thing -that mattered, I should have thought that Cousin Feng and Cousin Lin would be the only two in the family you would really care about.'

'Well now, if we're going to start comparing,' said Grandmother Jia, 'I hope your Aunt Xue won't think I am only saying this because she is here, but really and truly I do think that of all the girls in this family her Bao-chai is the one that I like the best.'

Aunt Xue laughingly demurred.

'You mustn't say that. I'm sure you can't really mean it.'

'No, no, I'm sure she does,' Lady Wang hurriedly inter-posed. 'I've often heard Mother speak well of Bao-chai when you weren't around.'

Bao-yu's contribution to the conversation had been made with the intention of encouraging Grandmother Jia to say something nice about Dai-yu. It came to him as a surprise when she started praising Bao-chai instead. He looked at Bao-chai and grinned; but she turned quickly away and began talking to Aroma.

Just-then a servant came to say that lunch over at the mansion was ready, and Grandmother Jia rose to go. Having first exhorted Bao-yu to 'hurry up and get better' and then admonished his maids, she began to move out of the room not without a polite attempt to make Aunt Xue go out ahead of her leaning on Xi-feng's arm.

'Is that soup ready yet?' she inquired when they were out of the room. Then, turning to Aunt Xue, she asked her if there was anything she particularly fancied for her lunch.

'Mind you let me know if there is,' she said. 'I have the power to make Fengie treat us to it.

Aunt Xue laughed.

'You shouldn't tease the poor girl! She's always getting nice things for you. But you're not much of an eater at the best of times.'

'Don't you believe it, Aunt!' said Xi-feng. 'Grannie knows how to tuck in. She'd have eaten *me* by now if she weren't afraid that she'd find me a bit too vinegary.'

This set them all off laughing. Even Bao-yu, in the inner room, had to join in, though it hurt him to do so. Aroma, standing beside him, was helpless with mirth.

'Mrs Lian really is a caution!'

Bao-yu took her hand and drew her down beside him.

'Come!' he said. 'You must be tired. You've been on your feet for hours.'

'Hey, you've forgotten!' said Aroma. 'While Miss Bao's still in the courtyard, you ought to ask her if she'll let Oriole come over to do that knotting for you.'

'Yes,' said Bao-yu. 'I'm glad you reminded me.' He raised his head and shouted towards the window.

'Cousin Bao! If you can spare her, after you've had your 'lunch, would you mind sending Oriole here to do some knotting for me

'Yes, certainly,' said Bao-chai, turning back to reply. 'I'll send her over presently.'

Grandmother Jia and the others had Stopped to listen. Not having heard properly, the old lady 'asked what it was, Bao-chai explained.

'Oh *do,* my dear!' said Grandmother Jia. '*Do* let him have her to do the knotting I If you need someone in her place, I have plenty of free hands in my apartment. Just pick which ever of my maids you like to wait on you.'

Aunt Xue and Bao-chai were amused.

'Let her go to him by all means,' said Aunt Xue, 'but there certainly won't be any need of a stand-in. She

has little enough to do but get up to mischief as it is.'

They had been walking on as they talked and presently came upon Xiang-yun, Patience and Caltrop picking balsams beside an artificial 'mountain' of rock. Seeing Grandmother Jia and the rest coming, they left off their flower gathering and came forward to join them.

Soon the little party emerged from the Garden. Fearing that Grandmother Jia might be fatigued, Lady Wang proposed that she should stop on the way back and sit down for a while in *her* apartment. The old lady's feet were indeed beginning to trouble her and she nodded in consent. Lady Wang sent a maid on ahead to prepare for her arrival.

Aunt Zhao was prudently avoiding Lady Wang for the time being by feigning sick, so of the two concubines it was only Aunt Zhou who came out with the old women-servants and maids of the apartment to welcome Grandmother Jia, holding up the door blind for her to enter and arranging the pillows and back-rest for her on the kang.

Moving up to it on Xi-feng's arm, the old lady installed herself on the right-hand side at the back with Aunt Xue in the guest's position beside her. Bao-chai and Xiang-yun sat nearer the edge of the kang on either side. Lady Wang served Grandmother Jia with tea, holding the cup ceremoniously in both her hands, and Li Wan in like manner offered tea to Aunt Xue.

'Let the younger women wait on us,' said Grandmother Jia to Lady Wang. 'You sit down over there so that we can talk to you.'

Lady Wang obediently took a seat on a stool-chair beside the kang. She instructed Xi-feng to be her deputy.

'You can tell them to serve Grandmother's lunch in here,' she said to Xi-feng. 'You had better get them to add a dish or two.,

Having said that she would, Xi-feng went outside and instructed a servant to take word round to Grandmother Jia's apartment. The old women there passed on the message in their turn, and soon a reinforcement of maids were hurrying on their way to Lady Wang's.

Lady Wang next gave instructions that the rest of the girls should be invited; but after a long wait only Tan-chun and Xi-chun turned up. Ying-chun was unwell and did not feel like eating. Dai-yu abstained so frequently—eating perhaps no more than five meals in every ten—that her absence on this occasion was scarcely noticed.

Soon lunch arrived and the servants brought up a low table and set it down on the kang. Xi-feng stood on the floor below, a bundle of ivory chopsticks wrapped up in a tea-towel in her hand.

'Now, Grannie and Auntie,' she said, 'I hope you are going to do as you're told and not stand on ceremony!'

Grandmother Jia looked at Aunt Xue and smiled.

'Shall we do as she says and stay put?'

'Yes, certainly,' said Aunt Xue, smiling back, whereupon Xi-feng proceeded to lay for them where they sat: two pairs of chopsticks on the far side for Grandmother Jia and Aunt Xue, one pair at either end for Bao-chai and Xiang-yun. Lady Wang and Li Wan stood on the floor below and supervised the serving of the dishes, while Xi-feng called for a set of clean things for one more person and went, chopsticks in hand, from dish to dish, making a selection from them for Bao-yu.

A few minutes later the lotus-leaf soup arrived and was presented to Grandmother Jia for her inspection. Lady Wang, glancing quickly round her, noticed Silver standing near at hand and ordered her to carry a bowl of it to Bao-yu together with the other things that Xi-feng had just put out for him; but Xi-feng objected that there was

too much for one person to carry. Just then Oriole and Providence chanced to enter, and Bao-chai, knowing that they had already had their lunch, suggested that Oriole should help with the carrying.

'Master Bao has been asking if you could go over there to do some knotting for him,' she told Oriole, 'You might as well go with her and do it -now.'

'Yes, Miss,' said Oriole, and went off with Silver, carrying her share of the bowls.

'They're terribly hot,' she said, when they were alone together. 'How are we going to carry them so far?'

'Don't worry!' said Silver, I know just the answer.'

She made one of the old women fetch a covered lacquer carrying-box. The bowls of soup, rice and so forth fitted into it easily. She told the old woman to follow them. She and Oriole then sauntered along empty-handed in the direction of **Green** Delights, while the old woman trotted along behind them carrying everything. When they reached the gate of the courtyard, Silver took the box from her and the two girls went on into the house alone.

They found Aroma, Musk and Ripple in the inner room, enjoying a joke with Bao-yu. The three of them got up, still laughing, when they saw Silver and Oriole enter, and Aroma, supposing that they had come from their respective apartments, remarked, as she relieved Silver of the box, on the coincidence of their arriving simultaneously. Having handed over the box, Silver plumped herself down on a stool-chair; but Oriole was less bold; and even when Aroma offered her a foot-stool to sit on, she still refused to be seated.

Bao-yu was naturally very pleased to see Oriole; but the sight of Silver, reminding him, with a pang of mingled shame and sorrow, of her sister Golden, impelled him to ignore Oriole and concentrate his attention on the other girl. Aroma noticed this neglect and was afraid that Oriole might be offended. Partly for this reason and partly because Oriole looked so uncomfortable standing up, but was evidently determined not to sit down in Bao-yu's presence, she took her by the hand and drew her into the adjoining room for a cup of tea and a chat.

Meanwhile in the inner room Musk and Ripple had laid Out the bowls and chopsticks and were waiting in readiness to serve Bao-yu his lunch; but Bao-yu was still occupied with Silver and seemed in no hurry to begin.

'How is your mother?' he asked her.

The girl sat silent, with a sullen, angry look on her face. When, with a muttered 'all right', she did at last answer him, she averted her eyes and would not look at him. Bao-yu was very much put out, but did his best to be pleasant.

'Who told you to bring this for me?'

'Her Ladyship and Mrs Lian. Who do you think?'

Bao-yu could see the misery in her face and knew that it was because of Golden that she looked like that. He wished he could humble himself before her, but the presence of the other maids inhibited him. He had to think of some way of getting rid of them. Having succeeded at last in doing so, he began, as soon as they were out of the room, to exercise all his charm upon Silver. At first she tried to ignore the questions with which he plied her; but he was so patient and persistent, meeting her unyielding stiffness with such warmth and gentleness, that in the end her heart misgave her and a faintly pleased expression began to steal over her face. Bao-yu judged the time ripe to entreat her smilingly for his lunch.

'Fetch me that soup will you, there's a dear. I'd like to try it now.'

'I can't feed other people,' said Silver. 'I never could. You'll have to wait till the others come back.'

'I'm not asking you to feed me,' said Bao-yu. 'I'm just asking you to get it for me because I can't walk. Once you've done that you can go back and tell them you've finished your errand and get on with your own lunch. I don't want to keep you from your food: you're probably starving. However, if you don't even feel up to passing me a bowl of soup, I'll just have to put up with the pain and get it myself' -

He tried to rise from his bed, but the effort cost him a cry of pain. Unable to hold out any longer when she saw the state he was in, Silver jumped to her feet.

'All right. Lie down, lie down! she said.' "Past sin, present suffering." You've got your retribution without having to wait for it, so you needn't expect me to feel sorry for you!'

She broke into a sudden peal of laughter and fetched him the soup.

'Silver dear,' said Bao-yu, 'if you still feel angry with me, get it over with now. Try to look pleasanter when you are with Their Ladyships. You mustn't look angry all the time when you are with *them,* or you'll be getting yourself into trouble.'

'Go on, get on with your soup I' said Silver. 'Keep the sugary stuff for other people. I know all about it!'

Bao-yu drank a couple of mouthfuls of the soup at her insistence, but artfully pretended not to like it.

'It doesn't taste nice.'

'Doesn't *taste* nice ?' said Silver with an expression of extreme disgust. 'Holy Name! if *that* doesn't taste nice, I'd like to know what does!'

'It's got no flavour,' said Bao-yu. 'Taste it yourself, if you don't believe me.'

Silver to prove him wrong indignantly raised the spoon to her lips and tasted.

Bao-yu laughed.

'Ah, now it'll taste all right!'

Silver realized that he had deliberately tricked her into drinking from the same bowl.

'You wouldn't drink it a moment ago,' she said, 'so now you shan't have any even if you say you want it.'

And though Bao-yu laughingly begged and pleaded, she refused to let him have it back and called in the other maids to give him the rest of his meal no sooner had they come in, however, than it was announced that 'two old nannies from Mr Fu's' had arrived 'to call on Master Bao'.

Bao-yu knew that the 'Mr Fu' referred to must be one Fu Shi, an Assistant Sub-Prefect who had started life as one of Jia Zheng's protégé's and made his way up in the world largely by trading on Jia Zheng's reputation. Jia Zheng thought highly of him, regarding him as the brightest of the various young fellows he had patronized, and Fu Shi for his part was assiduous in sending message and compliments to the mansion in order to keep up the connection.

Now if there were two sorts of people Bao-yu could not at any rice abide they were stupid old women and pushing young men. It may therefore seem strange that these two old nannies sent by the egregious Fu Shi should have been accorded instant admission to his sickroom. The reason was that Bao-yu' had heard that Fu Shi had a younger sister called Fu Qiu-fang, who, though

a virgin-pearl, still chambered from men's sight,

was commonly said to be both beautiful and talented. Bao-yu had not actually seen her; hut he had formed a picture of her in his imagination and worshipped 'her from afar. And since to have refused entry to the two old women would have been in his eyes tantamount to offering Qiu-fang an affront, he at once gave orders for them to be admitted.

Qiu-fang was, as a matter of fact, a girl of passable good looks and more than average intelligence. Her brother had entertained hopes of trading on these assets in order to ally himself matrimonially with some powerful or aristocratic family—an ambition which -had hitherto led him 'to look frowningly on lesser offers, with the—result that, at -the relatively great age of twenty-two, Qiu-fang remained unbetrothed. For the fact of

the matter was that the powerful and aristocratic families with whom he sought alliance looked on Fu -Shi as an impoverished pen-pusher deficient in both breeding and refinement and showed not the slightest inclination to want his sister as a daughter-in-law However, Fu Shi went on cultivating his intimacy with the Jia family and was still not without hopes of realizing his ambition in that direction.

It so happened that the two old nannies sent to see Bao-yu on this occasion were exceptionally ignorant old women. Hearing that they were to be admitted, they came into the room, delivered themselves of the sentence or two it took to inquire after his health, and thereafter lapsed into a stupid silence.

With the arrival of strangers, Silver had been obliged to drop the bantering tone she had begun to adopt with Bao-yu and stood, holding the soup-bowl in both her hands, listening in silence. It was left to Bao-yu to make what conversation he could with the women as he continued to eat his lunch. While so engaged, he reached out a hand for the soup, and 'Silver reciprocated mechanically; but as both of them had their eyes on the visitors, their uncoordinated movements resulted in a brief collision. The bowl was upset and hot soup spilled over Bao-yu's hand. Silver, startled, though herself unhurt, gave a nervous laugh.

'Now look what you've done!'

The other maids rushed forward to retrieve the bowl. Bao-yu, insensitive to his own pain, inquired anxiously after Silver.

'Where did you scald yourself? Does it hurt?'

Silver and the rest all laughed.

'*You're* the one who's been scalded,' said Silver. 'Why ask *me?*'

Only then did Bao-yu become conscious that his own hand had been burned. The maids hurriedly mopped up. Not wishing to continue his meal after this, he washed his hands, drank some 'tea, and spoke a little longer with the old women, who then took their leave and were seen through the Garden as far as the bridge by Skybright and some of the other maids.

When they found themselves alone, 'the two old women began discussing the visit with each other as they went along.

'Well, I've heard people say that this Bao-yu is like a bad fruit good to look at but rotten inside,' said one of them, 'and I must say I'm not surprised. He certainly does seem a bit simple. Fancy scalding his own hand and then asking someone else where it hurt! He *must* be a simpleton! Heh! heh! heh!'

'He really and truly *is* a bit simple,' said the other one. 'A number of them told me about it when I came here last. Once when he was out in the pouring rain and himself as wet as a drowned chicken, he says to someone, "It's raining," he says, run inside and get out of the rain." What a laugh! Heh! hehl hehl And he often cries or laughs when no one else is by. They say that when he sees a swallow he talks to the swallow, and when he sees a fish in the river he talks to the fish, and when he sees the stars or the moon, he sighs and groans and

mutters away to himself like a crazy thing. And he's as soft as a baby. Even the little maids can do what they like with him. If he's in the mood for saving, he'll make a fuss over a piece of thread; but other times they an smash things worth a fortune and he won't mind a bit.'

Still talking, they passed out of the gate of the Garden, at which point our narrative leaves them.

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Back at **Green** Delights, Aroma, seeing that the others had now gone, led Oriole into Bao-yu's room to ask what it was that he wanted done. Bao-yu gave Oriole a smile.

'I'm sorry, I was busy talking just now,' he said. 'I'm afraid I neglected you. The reason I've dragged you

here is because I want you to do some knotting for me.'

'What's it for?' said Oriole.

'Never mind that,' said Bao-yu airily. 'Do me some of every kind.'

Oriole clapped her hands and laughed.

'Goodness me! That would take me about ten year!'

'My dear young lady,' said Bao-yu pleasantly, 'you have all the time in the world at your disposal. I'm sure you could manage in less time than that.'

'Not in one sitting, at all events,' said Aroma. 'Better choose two or three of the main types and let her do one of each.'

'If you're talking about *types,'* said Oriole, 'there are really only three: fan tassels, rosary-nets and net-and-tassel fringes for sashes.'

'All right,' said Bao-yu, 'a sash-fringe.'

'What colour's the sash?' said Oriole.

'Crimson.'

'Black or navy-**blue** would go well with crimson,' said Oriole. 'With anything lighter the **crimson** would be too overpowering.'

'What goes with viridian?' said Bao-yu.

'Peach **pink**.'

'Mm. That sounds very colourful, certainly. What about something colourful but a bit more on the quiet side?'

'What about leek-**green** and **green**ish-**yellow**?' said Oriole. 'That's a very tasteful combination.'

'All right, you make me those three then one black, one peach-**pink** and one leek-**green**.'

'What pattern do you want for the netting?' said Oriole.

'What patterns are there?' said Bao-yu.

'There's stick-pattern, ladder-pattern, diamond, double diamond, linked rings, flower-pattern, willow-leaf...'

'What was the pattern of that netting you did the other day for Tan-chun?'

'Ah, that was a flower-pattern with filled-in centres.'

'I'd like it in that pattern.'

Aroma had meanwhile left them to fetch the silks. As she came back with them, an old woman called through the window to say that her lunch was ready.

'Off with you then,' said Bao-yu, 'and come back as soon as you have finished.'

'How can I possibly leave with a guest here in the room said Aroma.

'Don't be ridiculous! ' said Oriole. 'You go and have your lunch.'

Aroma smiled at that and tripped off, leaving the two of them alone together, except for two very junior maids who were to remain at hand in case they were wanted.

Bao-yu lay and watched Oriole knotting, chatting to her in a desultory way as he watched.

'How old are you?' he asked her.

Oriole replied without raising her head from her work.

'Fourteen.'

'What's your surname?'

'Huang.'

'Huang? That means "**yellow**". It goes well with your name. They say "**yellow** oriole", don't they?—

"**yellow** oriole", "golden oriole",'

'My name *was* "Golden Oriole" originally,' said Oriole, 'but Miss Bao found it too much of a mouthful, so she called me just "Oriole" for short, and now everyone else does.'

'Miss Bao must be very fond of you,' said Bao-yu. 'I expect later on when she gets married she'll want to take you with her.'

Oriole pulled a face and laughed.

'I've often said to Aroma,' Bao-yu went on, 'whoever gets you and your mistress will be a lucky man.'

'She's a *good* person, is our Miss Bao,' said Oriole, 'much more than you realize. There are things about her you don't find in many people in this world—more important things than good looks—though she's good-looking too, of course.'

Oriole's mellifluous, lilting voice and the simple, artless way in which she talked and laughed had powerfully affected Bao-yu. it increased his pleasure to hear her speaking in this way now about her mistress.

'What things?' he asked her eagerly. 'Tell me about them.'

'If I do,' said Oriole, 'you mustn't let her know that I to you.

'Of course not.'

They were interrupted at this point by a voice from the outer room.

'You're very quiet in there!'

As the two of them simultaneously turned to look, it was Bao-chai herself who stepped into the room. Bao-yu at once invited her to take a seat. When she had done so, she inquired what Oriole was making and leaned forward to inspect it. The first of the three sash-ends was already half completed.

'What do you want to make a thing like that for?' she asked. 'Why don't you make him a necklet to wear with his jade?'

Bao-yu clapped his hands delightedly. He had intended to ask Oriole to do this for him in the first place, but had forgotten.

'Clever coz! What a good thing you mentioned it! I'd quite forgotten. But what would be the right colour for it?'

'Let's see,' said Bao-chai. 'The brighter colours definitely wouldn't do. **Crimson** would clash. **Yellow** wouldn't be a sufficient contrast. Black would be too heavy. I'll tell you what. If you were to take a gold thread and a very fine black bugle-thread and twist them together—*that* would look nice.'

Bao-yu was delighted with the suggestion, and shouted several times for Aroma to fetch the gold thread. She came in while he was still shouting for her, carrying two plates of food and looking puzzled.

'I can't understand it,' -she said. 'Someone's just brought me these from Her Ladyship.'

'Oh, I expect they had more than they wanted there, so she's sent you this to share with the others,' said Bao-yu.

'No,' said Aroma. 'They said it was for me personally; but I'm not to go over and kotow for it. I don't know what to make of it.'

Bao-chai laughed.

'If it's for you to eat, I should go ahead and eat it! Never mind the whys and wherefores!'

'But it never happened before,' said Aroma. 'I feel so embarrassed.'

Bao-chai's lips puckered up mockingly.

'Embarrassed? Before very long you're going to have much more than *this* to feel embarrassed about!'

Aroma sensed something behind this remark. She knew Bao-chai too well to suppose that any such remark

of hers would be made triflingly. Remembering what Lady Wang had seemed to hint at in her interview of the previous day, she dropped the subject.

'I'll have these now then,' she said, holding the dishes out for Bao-yu to inspect, 'and as soon as I've washed, I shall bring you your gold thread.'

With that she hurried out again.

When she returned later, after having lunched and washed her hands, bringing the gold thread for Oriole's knotting, Bao-chai was no longer there, since she had been called away by Xue Pan's messenger.

Bao-yu once more lay back and watched Oriole knotting; but soon they were interrupted once more, this time by a couple of maids from Lady Xing's. They brought two sorts of fruit and a message for him from their mistress.

'Her Ladyship says are you able to walk? She says if you are, she'd like -you to come over some time and amuse yourself. She says tell him I'm thinking of him.'

'Tell her,' Bao-yu replied politely, 'that as soon as I *can* walk, I shall certainly be round to pay my respects. Tell her that the pain is a little better than it was and that she is not to worry.'

Asking the two girls to be seated, he called Ripple to him and asked her to take half of the fruit they had brought and offer it to Dai-yu; but just as she was about to go, Dai$_1$u could be heard talking in the courtyard. He told Ripple to hurry outside and invite her in.

For further details, please -consult the following chapter.

CHAPTER 36

*Bao-chai visits **Green** Delights and hears strange words from a sleeper*
Bao-yu visits Pear-tree Court and learns hard facts from a performer

WHEN Grandmother Jia got back to her own apartment after lunching with Lady Wang, she was naturally very pleased to have seen Bao-yu making such rapid progress; but her pleasure soon gave way to worry when she began wondering what would happen when he was well enough for Jia Zheng to start asking for him again. To guard against that contingency she had Jia Zheng's Head Boy brought before her to receive instructions direct from her own mouth.

'In future,' she told him, 'whenever the Master is entertaining guests or seeing anybody and asks for Bao-yu, you are to say, straight away, without needing to see me about it, first of all that Master Bao was very seriously injured by his beating and will need several months' complete rest before he can walk properly; and secondly that he has just made an offering to his star-guardian because of an unlucky conjunction in his horoscope and isn't allowed to see outsiders or go outside the inner gate until the beginning of the eighth month.'

She called Nannie Li and Aroma to her as soon as the Head Boy had gone and instructed them to tell Bao-yu this, so that no worries should retard the progress of his recovery.

Bao-yu had always hated meeting or making conversation with senior males of the scholar-official class and detested all occasions which involved dressing up, such as visits of congratulation and condolence and the various other formal exchanges to which members of that

class devote so great a part of their time. His grandmother's dispensation was therefore particularly gratifying to him, and he used it as an excuse for cutting himself off from all contact with visiting relations and friends. He even pleased himself about whether or not he made the customary morning and evening duty-calls on the senior members of the household. Each day was spent playing or resting in the Garden, and during the whole of the day, except for the brief period in the early morning when he went outside to visit his mother and grandmother, he was the willing captive of his maids and did for them whatever little services it pleased them to command. In such enjoyable indolence several weeks slipped agreeably by. From time to time, as opportunity presented itself, someone like Bao-chai would attempt to remonstrate with him; but her remonstrances would be indignantly rejected.

'Why should a pure, sweet girl like you want to go imitating that ghastly crew of thievish, place-hunting *career worms,*' he would say, 'bothering her head about "fame" and "reputation" and all that sort of rubbish? All these notions you are parroting were dreamed up by meddlesome old men in days gone by for the express purpose of leading astray the whiskered idiots who came after them. I really think it's too bad that I should have to live in an age when the minds of nice, sensible girls are contaminated by such idiocies. It's a tank abuse of the intellectual gifts that you were born with!'

Hearing him talk so wildly, the remonstrators concluded that he was slightly mad, and eventually gave up trying to be serious with him. The exception was Dai-yu, who, ever since they were little children together, had never once spoken to him about the need to 'get on in the world' or 'make a name for oneself'. This was one of the reasons why he so much respected her.

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But to return to our narrative.

Some time after Golden's death, Xi-feng began receiving presents and courtesy calls from various senior members of the domestic staff. Though she could not for the moment guess what lay behind these flattering attentions, her suspicions were aroused, and one day, in the course of which she had once more received presents from these people, she laughingly questioned Patience on the subject when they were alone together in the evening.

'I'm surprised you haven't guessed *that!*' said Patience a little scornfully. 'I think, if you were to look into it, you'd find that all of these people had daughters working for Her Ladyship. There are four senior maids on Her Ladyship's establishment who each get one tael a month, the rest only get a few hundred cash each; and now that Golden's dead, one of the tael-a-month places is vacant. I expect these people are trying to get it for their own daughters.'

'Of course!' said Xi-feng, much amused. 'Of course! I'm sure you are right. Well, I do think it rather greedy of them. They earn quite good money as it is, they don't have any really hard work to do, *and* they've got daughters to bring them in a little extra income. I think for them to want to get this plum for themselves *as well* is really a bit too much. I wouldn't have thought they could afford to keep sending me presents like this. Still, that's their concern! If they want to go on giving me presents, I shall go on taking them. But I shall still do what I was going to do anyway. It won't make any difference to me.'

In pursuance of this policy she kept the servants waiting for a decision and watched the presents accumulate; then, when no more seemed to be forthcoming, she availed herself of the first opportunity to raise the matter with

Lady Wang. This occurred one day about noon when Aunt Xue, Bao-chai and Dai-yu were in Lady Wang's apartment sharing a water-melon with her. Xi-feng tackled Lady Wang while they sat eating the melon.

'You've been short of a maid, Aunt, since Silver's sister died,' said Xi-feng. 'Have you anyone in mind to replace her with? You might let us know if you have, so that we know what to do with next month's allowance.'

Lady Wang thought for a bit.

'Do I *have* to have four maids or five maids or whatever it is?' she asked. 'It seems to me that if the maids I've got are adequate, I might as well do without the other one.'

Xi-feng smiled.

'In principle, of course, you are right, Aunt; but we *have* got fixed rules about these things, and when some people at the bottom of the scale are making a great fuss about keeping their number *up,* it wouldn't do to have you cutting yours *down.* In any case, the saving would only be one tael a month:

it would hardly be worth making.'

Lady Wang again reflected for some moments.

'Very well,' she said at last, you can go on paying the allowance as before, but you needn't find me another maid. Silver shall have it. Her sister gave me a lot of service before she was so unfortunate, poor child. I don't think it would be excessive to give Silver a double allowance, for her sister's sake.'

After promising to see that this was done, Xi-feng turned smilingly to Silver and congratulated her. Silver hurried forward and kotowed in gratitude to Lady Wang.

'That reminds me,' said Lady Wang: 'what allowance do Aunt Zhao and Aunt Zhou get each month?'

'The fixed amount is two taels each a month,' said Xi-feng, but Aunt Zhao gets an additional two taels for Huan, so she really gets four taels. Then on top of that they each get two strings of cash a month for their maids.'

'Do they get the full amount every month?' said Lady Wang.

Xi-feng was somewhat taken aback.

'Of course. Why not?' she replied, a trifle sharply.

'It's just that I thought I heard someone the other day complaining that they were a string of cash short,' said Lady Wang. 'I wonder how that could have happened?'

Xi-feng smiled disarmingly.

'The allowance for Aunt Zhao's and Aunt Zhou's maids *used* to be one string each a month, but last year Accounts reduced it by a half to five hundred cash. Aunt Zhao and Aunt Zhou are allowed two maids each, so that means they now get one string a month less than they used to. This is something completely outside my control. I'd be only too happy to pay them more if I could, but the cut was made by Accounts, and all I can do is to hand out what I am given. It's not my decision. In fact, I've raised the matter once or twice with them and told them they ought to go back to the original payment, but all they'll say is that that's what's been decided and nothing can be done about it. Actually, now that *I* do the paying, people do at least get their allowances on time. In the old days, when Accounts made the payments direct, we were *always* having trouble. Never a month went by without some one getting into debt because they hadn't been paid on time.' Another silence followed in which Lady Wang was evidently thinking.

'How many of Lady Jia's maids get one tael a month?' she asked eventually.

'Seven—well, eight really, if you count Aroma.'

'Yes, I see,' said Lady Wang. 'Bao-yu wouldn't have any tael-a-month maids of his own, of course. Aroma still counts as one of Lady Jia's maids.'

'Oh yes. Aroma is still Grandma's maid,' said Xi-feng. 'Grandma lets Bao-yu employ her, but her pay still

comes out of Grandma's allowance. It would be quite out of the question to cut her pay simply because she's working for Bao-yu. If you wanted to do that, you'd first have to find another maid for Grandma. And even then, of course, if you wanted her to be paid as a member of Bao-yu's establishment, to make it fair you'd really need to give Huan another maid, too. Incidentally, the fact that Bao-yu's senior maids like Skybright and Musk get a string of cash a month and the juniors like Melilot five hundred is due to Grandma's own personal instructions; so I don't think anyone is really in a position to make a fuss about *that.*'

Aunt Xue laughed.

'Listening to Feng is like listening to a load of walnuts being emptied out of a cart - all those facts and figures! And everything accounted for—everything just and fair!'

'I trust none of the facts and figures were *wrong,* Aunt,' said Xi-feng.

'No, no, nothing wrong with the facts and figures,' said Aunt Xue pleasantly. 'It's just that you would save yourself some energy by taking them a little more slowly.'

Xi-feng seemed about to laugh, but checked herself to hear what her other aunt had to say. Lady Wang, however, deliberated for some little while longer before making her pronouncement.

'Find someone to wait on Lady Jia in place of Aroma,' she said eventually, 'and stop paying Aroma out of Lady Jia's allowance. Instead you can pay her two taels and a string of cash a month out of my personal allowance of twenty taels. And in future, whatever arrangements are made about Aunt Zhao's and Aunt Zhou's allowances, I want you to pay Aroma at exactly the same rate only whatever it is, it's all to come out of my personal allowance. I don't want Accounts getting mixed up in this.'

Having promised to carry out these instructions, Xi-feng turned to Aunt Xue and nudged her playfully.

'There you are I What did I tell you? It's turned out exactly as I said.'

'And so it should,' said Aunt Xue warmly. 'It should have been done long ago. She's a lovely girl—and it isn't only her looks I'm referring to, either. She has such a generous, open way of doing things, and she is so polite and friendly to talk to. There's a strong little will there, though—plenty of determination underneath it all. Oh, I think she's a real treasure.'

'She is a dear, good child,' said Lady Wang. 'I don't think the rest of you realize just how good she is. Ten times better than my Bao-yu, that's quite certain. If Bao-yu can keep her with him always, he'll he a very lucky boy.'

'If you think that, Aunt,' said Xi-feng, 'why not have her plucked and painted and make her his chamber-wife openly?'

'No, it wouldn't do,' said Lady Wang. 'First of all he is too young; secondly Sir Zheng would never agree to it; and in the third place, even if we allow a certain amount of freedom between them, as long as he still thinks of her as his maid, there is some chance that he will listen to what she says, but once we make her his chamber-wife, she will feel less free to tell him what she thinks of him when he is being silly. No, I think for the moment at any rate we should leave it a little vague. We can make a more definite arrangement in two or three years' time.'

After pausing long enough to ascertain that Lady Wang had nothing more to say, Xi-feng turned and went. A group of stewards' wives were waiting for her under the eaves in the narrow alley-way at the back to report to her on various household matters. They smiled at her as she emerged, and one of them chaffed her about the length of her visit.

'You've been a long time today, Madam. What can you have been talking about to keep you so long? I hope you haven't overheated yourself with so much talking!'

Xi-feng stood in the doorway in a very unladylike attitude, one foot on the threshold, rolling her sleeves back and smiling at no one in particular.

'There's a nice little draught out here. I think I'll stand here for a bit and cool off.'

She turned to the women.

'Did you say I've been a long time? It's hardly surprising. Today Her Ladyship has been asking about just about everything that's happened here during the past two hundred years.' Her voice lost its jocular tone and became suddenly harsher. 'From now on if I ever feel like doing something really spiteful, I shall do it. Let her complain to Her Ladyship if she has a mind to, I don't care. Stupid woman I Stupid, chicken-witted, evil-tongued, snivelling, misbegotten *bitch!* She ought to wake up. One of these days they'll make a dean sweep and take the whole lot away—*then* she'll have something to shout about! Complain about *me*, would she, because her maid's allowance has been cut? Who the Holy Name does she think she is? She's only a bit of bought goods herself. What's the likes of her doing with maids to wait on her any way?'

Leaving the stewardesses to make what they would of this explosion, she strode off to look for someone suitable to take a message in to Grandmother Jia.

At which point we leave her.

*

After Aunt Xue and the two girls had finished their watermelon, they sat talking for a few minutes longer with Lady Wang before leaving, Aunt Xue to return to her own apartment, Bao-chai and Dai-yu to go back into the Garden. Bao-chai invited Dai-yu to accompany her to the Lotus Pavilion to pay a call on Xi-chun, but Dai-yu said she was going to have a bath, and presently parted company with Bao-chai, leaving her to continue on her way there alone. Bao-chai's route took her past the House of **Green** Delights, and as she drew near it, she thought she would call in to chat for a while with Bao-yu and help him to dispel the sleepiness of the early afternoon.

The courtyard was silent as she entered it. Not a bird's cheep was to be heard. Even the storks were asleep, hunched up in the shadow of the plantains. Keeping to the relative coolness of the covered walk, she made her way round to the house. In the outer room maids were lying about in all directions asleep. Slipping behind the tall mirror and through the elaborately carved partition, she passed into the inner room where Bao-yu lay inside his protective summer 'cabinet' of net. He, too, was fast asleep. Aroma sat at his bedside sewing, a white horse-hair fly-whisk with a handle of white rhinoceros-horn at her side. Bao-chai entered the 'cabinet' and laughed softly at Aroma.

'Aren't you being rather over-cautious ?' she whispered. 'What's the fly-whisk for? Surely no flies or mosquitoes can get in *here?'*

Aroma looked up, startled, hurriedly put down her sewing, and rose to her feet.

'Oh, it's Miss Bao I I wasn't expecting you,' she whispered. 'You gave me quite a shock no, we don't get any flies or mosquitoes in here, but there's a little tiny insect that finds its way through the holes in the netting. They're so small, you don't notice them; but when you're asleep they can give you a nasty bite - a bit like an ant-bite.'

'That's not surprising,' said Bao-chai. 'You've got water behind you here, you see; you've also got a lot of sweet-smelling flowers outside; and indoors is perfumed as well. This kind of insect breeds in the insides of flowers and is attracted towards anything fragrant. That's why you get them inside the house.'

While she was speaking, her eye fell on the sewing that Aroma had just put down. It was a pinafore of the

kind children wear, with bib and apron in one. It was of white satin lined with **red** silk, and the pattern Aroma was embroidering on it was one of mandarin ducks disporting themselves in a background of lotuses. The ducks were in rainbow colours, and the lotuses had **red** flowers and **green** leaves.

'Goodness, how beautiful I' she exclaimed. 'Who's it for? It must be someone very special, to deserve work as fine as this.'

Aroma turned her head and shot her lips out in the direction of the figure sleeping on the bed.

'Him? He's too big to wear that sort of thing, surely?'

'He wouldn't wear them to start with. That's why I try to make them so nicely—so that when he sees them he can't resist putting them on. I try to get him to wear them in this hot weather, so that if he uncovers himself in his sleep, there's no risk of his getting chilled. If you think there's a1ot of work in this one, you ought to see the one he's wearing!'

'I wonder you can have the patience,' said Bao-chai.

'I've done such a lot of work on it today,' said Aroma, 'my neck is quite stiff from bending over.' She smiled at Bao-chai entreatingly: 'Do us a favour, Miss: sit here a bit in my place, will you, while I go off and stretch my legs? I'll be back directly.'

Saying this, she slipped quietly out, not waiting for a reply. So intent was Bao-chai on the embroidery that she sank down almost without realizing what she was doing into the place that Aroma had just vacated. It really *was* a most beautiful piece of work; in fact, she found it irresistible, and taking up the needle, began sewing it where Aroma had left off.

Meanwhile Dai-yu, on her way back to have a bath, had run into Xiang-yun and agreed to the latter's proposal that they should together call on Aroma to congratulate her on her promotion. They arrived in the courtyard of **Green** Delights to find everything plunged in silence. Xiang-yun went round to the side to see if Aroma was in any of the maids' rooms. Dai-yu went up to the main building and peeped through the gauze window into Bao-yu's bedroom. She saw Bao-yu, clothed in little else but a thin, rose-coloured shirt, sprawled out asleep on the bed and Bao-chai sitting beside him sewing, with a fly-whisk in readiness at her side.

For some moments she goggled incredulously at this touching domestic scene, then, fearful of disturbing it, she tore herself away to stifle her mounting giggles. When she had somewhat subdued them, she beckoned to Xiang-yun to come over and look. Wondering what extraordinary spectacle could have put her in such a state, Xiang-yun hurried over for a peep. She, too, found the scene inside a comical one and would have burst out laughing; but in her case it was the consideration that Bao-chai had always been so kind to her that caused her to control her mirth. And knowing how merciless Dai-yu could be with her witticisms, she took her by the hand and dragged her away, explaining as she did so that she had just remembered that Aroma had said something about going at noon to wash some clothes in the lake.

'I'm sure that's where she will be,' she said to Dai-yu. 'Let's go and look for her there.'

Dai-yu was not in the least deceived, and showed as much by her sardonic laugh. But she followed her nonetheless.

Bao-chai meanwhile continued her sewing undisturbed. She had just completed her second, or maybe it was her third petal, when Bao-yu, who appeared to be dreaming, cried out angrily in his sleep.

'Why should I believe what those old monks and Taoists say? I don't believe in the marriage of gold and jade. I believe in the marriage of stone and flower.'

The words astounded her. She had still not recovered from the shock of hearing them when Aroma returned.

'What, isn't he awake yet?'

Bao-chai shook her head.

'I just now ran into Miss Lin and Miss Shi,' said Aroma. 'I suppose they didn't come in *here*, did they?'

'Not that I know of,' said Bao-chai. She glanced up at Aroma with a sly smile: 'Did they tell you anything?'

Aroma coloured.

'Oh, a lot of nonsense - as usual I They were only joking, though.'

'They *weren't* joking,' said Bao-chai, '- not this time. I was going to tell you myself, but you went rushing off before I had a chance to.'

Just at that moment a maid arrived from Xi-feng summoning Aroma to go and see her.

'There you are I' said Bao-chai. 'That'll be what she wants to see you about.'

Aroma had to arouse two of the sleeping maids to take her place in the inner room; then she and Bao-chai left **Green** Delights together. They parted company outside, and Aroma went off to Xi-feng's place on her own. When she got there she was, as Bao-chai had predicted, formally acquainted with the new arrangements concerning her pay and status that had just been made for her by Lady Wang. She was told that she should go over to Lady Wang's to kotow her thanks, but that there was no need for her to see Grandmother Jia.

She found this interview with Xi-feng acutely embarrassing. By the time she got back from Lady Wang's, Bao-yu was already awake. She answered him evasively when he asked her where she had been and waited for the silence and darkness of the night to tell him of her unofficial promotion to his bed. Bao-yu was delighted.

'I hope there'll be no more talk of leaving me *now!'* he said, smiling broadly at her. 'Do you remember the time when you got back from visiting your family and tried to frighten me with all that talk about your brother wanting to buy you out of service and how there was no future for you here and no point in your staying permanently, and all those other heartless, unkind things you said? I'd like to see anyone trying to take you away from me now!'

Huh!' Aroma sniffed scornfully. 'That's not at all the way it is. I belong to Her Ladyship now. *Now* if I want to leave you, I don't have to talk to you about it at all. All I have to do is have a word with Her Ladyship, and off I go!'

Bao-yu laughed.

'Suppose I *were* at fault and you told Her Ladyship and asked her to let you go; don't you think you'd feel just a tiny bit uncomfortable afterwards when it got about that you had left me because I wasn't good enough for you?

'Why ever should I?' said Aroma. 'Of course, I wouldn't go if it meant marrying a thief or a murderer. There's always another way out. I could always take my own life. We all have to die some time or other; it's just a question of when. All you've got to do is stop breathing, that's all. After that you hear nothing, see nothing - it's all over!'

'Stop it, now! Stop it!' said Bao-yu, covering her mouth with his hand. 'You don't have to say things like that.'

All too familiar with the peculiarities of this master who condemned flattering 'auspicious' talk as false and hollow, but was upset and morose if you told him the truth, Aroma regretted her blunder in having too openly spoken her mind. Smilingly she turned the conversation on to topics which experience taught her were agreeable to him: the beauties of Nature, the beauties of girls, *girls.* But somehow from there the conversation imperceptibly found its way round to the subject of girls *dying.* Suddenly realizing this, Aroma—it was she who was talking at the time— broke off in alarm. Bao-yu, who up to that point had been listening to her enthralled, laughed at her sudden silence.

‘We all have to die, as you said yourself just now. The problem is how to die well. Those whiskered idiots who take quite literally the old saw that “a scholar dies protesting and a soldier dies fighting” and get themselves killed off on the assumption that those are the only two ways in which a man of spirit can die gloriously, would do better to die in their beds. For when you come to think of it, the only real occasion for protesting is when one’s ruler is misguided, and the only real occasion for fighting is when one’s country is at war. If the scholar is so greedy for martyrdom that he throws away his life at the earliest opportunity, what is to become of the poor misguided ruler in the absence of good advisers? And if the soldier so hankers for a hero’s death that he gets himself killed off in the first encounter, what is to become of his country without soldiers to fight its battles—?’

‘But surely,’ Aroma interrupted, ‘those famous men in the olden days laid their lives down because they *had* to?’

‘Nonsense!’ said Bao-yu. ‘The soldiers among them lacked generalship; as a consequence, they had nothing but their physical courage to rely on. They threw their lives away out of sheer incompetence. Do you call that dying because they had to? And the scholars were even worse. On the strength of having read a couple of books and got up a text or two by heart, they began to cry stinking fish as soon as they found the smallest thing at Court not as they thought it should be, in the hope of winning themselves an imperishable reputation for honesty; then, if the Court didn’t immediately change its policy, they would work themselves into a passion and promptly get themselves killed. You won’t, surely, say that *they* died because they had to? What you have to remember is that Emperors hold their power from Heaven, and it’s unthinkable that Heaven should lay the huge responsibility of empire on any but the worthiest shoulders. So you can see that all those death-with-honour characters you have so high an opinion of were thinking only of their own personal fame and glory. They weren’t really thinking of their loyal duty to their sovereign at all.

‘Now *my* idea of a glorious death would be to die now, while you are all around me; then your tears could combine to make a great river that my corpse could float away on, far, far away to some remote place that no bird has ever flown to, and gently decompose there until the—wind had picked my bones clean, and after that never, never to be reborn again as a human being—that would be a really *good* death.’

‘I’m sleepy,’ said Aroma, unwilling to reply, for she had observed that his mad fit was on him again. And Bao-yu at once closed his eyes -and fell fast asleep.

By next morning the subject appeared to have been quite forgotten.

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A day arrived when Bao-yu seemed to have exhausted the Garden’s possibilities, and its charms were beginning to weary him. *The Return of the Soul* was very much on his mind at this time. He had read it through twice without in any way abating his appetite for more. Having recently been told that the best singer among the twelve little actresses of Pear Tree Court was the soubrette called Charmante, he resolved, for a change of scene, to go over there and look her up, so that he could ask her to sing him some of the arias from it.

The only girls he recognized when he arrived there were Tresor and Topaze, who greeted him with smiles and invited him to be seated. When he asked where Charmante was, the girls all answered him in chorus:

‘In her room.’

Bao-yu at once went to the room indicated. Charmante was in there on her own. She was lying stretched out on her bed, but made no attempt to get up when she saw him enter. Nothing daunted, he sat himself down beside

her and, in the familiar way he habitually adopted with girls, smilingly requested her to sing the section from the *Return* that begins with the words

In these quiet courts the floating gossamer...

But Charmante did not respond in the expected manner. She rose up quickly and drew away from him when he sat down beside her; and in answer to his request to sing, she informed him, with a cold, unsmiling expression, that she was 'not invoice'.

'I strained my voice the other day at a command performance for Her Grace,' she said. 'I am still resting it.'

She was sitting opposite him as she said this, so that he had a full view of her face. He remembered now, as he studied it, where he had seen that face before. *She* was the girl he had seen scratching QIANS on the ground that day under the rose pergola.

And now here she was behaving as if his very presence was distasteful to her. Never in his life before had he experienced such instant rejection. Reduced to mumbling incoherence by his embarrassment, he coloured, and—since there was obviously no point in staying—left the room.

Surprised to see him come out again so soon, the others asked him the reason. Trésor laughed when he told her what had happened.

'Wait until Mr Qiang gets back,' she said. 'If he asks her to, she'll sing for you.'

Bao-yu did not know quite what to make of this.

'Qiang?' he said. 'Where is he, anyway?'

'He went out only a few minutes ago,' said Trésor. 'I expect Charmante said she wanted something and he's gone out to try and get it for her.'

Bao-yu seemed to find this of enormous interest and decided to stay a little longer and see what happened. Sure enough, Jia Qiang presently returned from his expedition. He was carrying a bird-cage with a bird inside. The cage had a miniature stage fastened to the top of it. Jia Qiang was on his way inside to look for Charmante, obviously feeling very pleased with himself, when he caught sight of Bao-yu and halted.

'What's that bird you've got there?' Bao-yu asked him.

'It's a whitecap,' said Jia Qiang, smiling proudly. 'It can hold a flag in its beak and do a little turn on the stage.'

'How much did you pay for it?'

'One tael and sixteen pennyweights of silver.'

He invited Bao-yu to be seated while he went into Charm-ante's room to show off his purchase; but Bao-yu, whose desire to hear Charmante sing was now quite forgotten in his eagerness to find out exactly how things lay between her and Jia Qiang, joined the girls as they clustered round the door-way to watch.

'Look! Look what I've brought for you,' said Jia Qiang, full of smiles.

'What is it?'

Charmante had been lying down again, but sat up when he entered.

'I've got a little bird to keep you company, to stop you getting so depressed. You watch! I'll make him perform for you.'

He took a few grains from his pocket and coaxed the bird out on to the stage, where it picked up a diminutive mask and flag and hopped and pirouetted about like an actor playing the *warrior's* part in a play. The girls all laughed delightedly and said it was 'sweet'. *All* except Charmante. She merely gave a

scornful ‘huh!’ or two and lay back on the bed again in disgust.

Jia Qiang smiled—almost beseechingly.

‘How do you like it?’

‘You and your family!’ said Charmante bitterly. ‘It isn’t enough to take decent girls from their homes and shut them up in this prison to learn beastly opera all day. Now you have to bring a *bird* along to do it as well. I suppose it’s to keep me reminded of my misery. And you have the audacity to ask me “do I like it?”!’

Her words appeared to make Jia Qiang quite frantic, for he uttered a string of the most violent and passionate oaths in reply.

‘I’m a stupid fool and I should have known better,’ he said. ‘I spent all that money on the thing because I thought it might cheer you up. It never occurred to me that you might take it like this. Well, let the thing go then! It’s an “act of merit” to free living creatures, so at least you’ll get *some* good from it. Either it will help you in the next life or free you from sickness in this one.’

With that he released the bird, which promptly flew away, and stamped on the cage until it was smashed to pieces.

‘Maybe birds aren’t as important as human beings,’ said Charmante, ‘but they have mothers and fathers just the same. Can’t you see how cruel it is to take them away from their nests and make them perform for people’s amusement? I coughed up two mouthfuls of blood today. Her Ladyship sent someone to look for you. She wanted you to get me a doctor so that we could find out what to do, but instead of a doctor you bring *this* thing back with you, to make a mock of me. It’s just my luck to fall ill when I’ve got no one to care for me or take any notice.’

She began to cry.

‘But I asked the doctor about you yesterday evening and he said it wasn’t serious,’ Jia Qiang protested. ‘He said you were to take a couple of doses of that medicine and he’d come and look at you again in two days’ time. I’d no idea that you’d been spitting blood. Well, I’d better go and get him straight away.’

He began to go, but Charmante called him back.

‘Stay where you are! Don’t go rushing off in this burning heat. You’re Only going to fetch him because you’re in a temper, anyway. I wouldn’t see him now if he came I’

Hearing her say this, Jia Qiang halted.

Bao-yu had been watching this scene with open-mouthed fascination. At last he understood the real meaning of all those QIANGS. There was obviously no place for him here, so he slipped away. Jia Qiang was so absorbed in his concern for Charmante that he did not even notice him go and it was left to the little actresses to see him out.

It was a reflective, self-critical Bao-yu who made his way back to **Green** Delights, so bemused that he scarcely noticed where he was going. When he arrived, Dai-yu and Aroma were sitting in conversation together. He looked at Aroma and sighed heavily.

‘What I told you the other night was wrong,’ he said. ‘I’m not surprised that Father tells me I have a “small capacity but a great self-conceit”. I mean, that stuff about all of you making a river of tears for me when I die: I realize now that it’s not possible. I realize now that we each have our own allotted share of tears and must be content with what we’ve got.’

Aroma was surprised to hear him bring this up again. She had assumed that what he said that night was in jest and must long since have been forgotten. She laughed.

‘You know, sometimes I think you really *are* a bit touched!’

Bao-yu was silent.

From the curious way in which he was behaving Dai-yu could see that something had got into him, but judged it not her business to inquire what. To change the subject she asked him about something of a more practical nature.

‘When I was with your Mother just now she told me that it is Mrs Xue’s birthday tomorrow. She told me to ask you whether you intend going or not. When you’ve decided, she’d like you to send someone round and let her know.’

‘Well, I didn’t go last time, when it was Uncle She’s birthday,’ said Bao-yu. ‘It will be a bit awkward if I go this time and run into someone from Uncle She’s. I think I’d better stop going to birthdays altogether. In any case, it’s terribly hot, and I should have to dress up for it. And I don’t think Auntie would really *mind* if I didn’t go.’

‘That’s no way to talk!’ said Aroma. ‘There’s no comparison whatever between Sir She and your Aunt Xue. You’re no distance away from her, for a start. And she is your Mother’s sister. I’m sure if you didn’t go she’d wonder what was the matter. If you’re afraid of the heat, why don’t you go first thing in the morning, when it’s still cool? All you need do is make your kotow and drink a cup of tea, and then you can come back again. Surely that would be more civil?’

‘Of course you must go I’ said Dai-yu, before he had time to reply. ‘Surely you owe a visit to the person who saved you from the mosquitoes?’

‘What mosquitoes ?’ said Bao-yu, mystified. ‘What are you talking about?’

Aroma proceeded to tell him how Bao-chai had sat at his bedside with a fly-whisk beside her while he slept.

‘How frightful!’ Bao-yu was most upset. ‘However did I come to be asleep when *she* was there? And I’d got hardly anything on. How disgusting of me!’

After that there was no further question, of course. He would *definitely* be going over for his Aunt Xue’s birthday on the morrow.

While the three of them were talking, Xiang-yun came in wearing her going-out clothes and looking very dressed-up. Her uncle the Marquis’s people had arrived to fetch her, and she had come to say good-bye. Bao-yu and Dai-yu both rose and invited her to be seated, but she could not stay, so the two of them accompanied her through to the front.

Xiang-yun was struggling to hold back her tears, for she dared not show her distress openly in front of her uncle’s people. The arrival a few moments later of her dear Bao-chai, who had hurried over specially to see her off, made going back seem even more unbearable. Fortunately Bao-chai, always more perceptive than the others, realized that things would become even more difficult for Xiang-yun if the servants who had come to collect her were to tell her aunt when they got back that she had made a fuss, so she did all she could to hasten her departure.

The two girls and Bao-yu saw Xiang-yun as far as the inner gate. Bao-yu would have gone further, but Xiang-yun restrained him. Nevertheless, when she had gone a little way towards her carriage, she changed her mind and, turning back, called him to her so that she could whisper a parting request in his ear.

> ‘Remind Her Old Ladyship of me from time to time, will you, in case she forgets? Then perhaps she’ll send someone to invite me over again.’

Bao-yu gave vigorous assurances that he would do this for her, then, when they had seen her get into her carriage, they all turned and went in again.

As to what followed, that must be looked for in the following chapter.

CHAPTER 37

A happy inspiration prompts Tan-chun to found the
Crab-flower Club
And an ingenious arrangement enables Bao-chai to settle the
chrysanthemum poem titles

THIS year *Jia* Zheng was appointed Commissioner *for* Education in one of the provinces, with instructions to leave for his tour of duty on the twentieth of the eighth month. When the day for his departure arrived, he took leave of his ancestors in the family shrine, kotowed to his mother, and was seen on his way as far as the hostelry of the 'Tearful Parting' (the first post-halt on his journey) by Bao-yu and other junior male members of the clan.

Jia Zheng's doings after his departure are not recorded in this history; we merely observe that the departure left Bao-yu free to play and idle in the Garden to his heart's content witout the least fear of restraint or reprisal.

The days in idleness passed by
To swell the tale of wasted years

On the day of which we write Bao-yu was feeling very bored. He had returned from perfunctory morning calls on his mother and grandmother and had just finished changing back into his everyday clothes, when Tan-chun's maid Ebony arrived carrying a carefully-folded letter from her mistress.

'I'm glad you've come,' said Bao-yu, as she handed him the letter. 'I'd been meaning to see your mistress this morning, but I forgot. How is she? Is she any better?'

'She's quite better, thank you,' said Ebony. 'She's stopped taking her medicine today. It was only a slight chill that she was suffering from.'

Bao-yu unfolded the elegant patterned notepaper and glanced at the contents:

Dear Brother,

Some nights ago, when the moon came out in a sky freshly clear after the rain, the garden seemed veritably awash with moonlight, and sleep in the face of so rare a spectacle was unthinkable. Thrice the clepsydra had been turned, and still I lingered beneath the tall paulownias, reluctant to go in. But in the end the treacherous night air betrayed me, and by morning I was lamentably indisposed.

How kind of you to have visited me in my sickroom! and how exquisitely thoughtful to have sent your maid-servant shortly afterwards with solicitous inquiries and with those delicious lychees and the calligraphy by Yan Zhen-qing!

While I have been lying here quietly on my own, I have been thinking how in the olden days even men whose lives were spent amidst the burly-burly of public affairs would keep some quiet retreat for themselves with its tiny corner of mountain and trickle of running water; and how they would seek, by whatever arts and blandishments they knew of, to assemble there a little group of kindred spirits to share in their enjoyment of it; and how, on the basis of such leisure-time associations, rhymers' guilds and poetry clubs were then founded, so that the fleeting inspirations of an idle hour might often be perpetuated in imperishable masterpieces of verse.

Now although I am no poet myself, I am privileged to live 'midst rocks and streams' and in the company of such gifted practitioners of the poetic art. as Xue and Lin; and it seems to me a great pity that the romantic courts

and pavilions of our Garden should not echo with the jocund carousal of assembled bards, and its flowering groves and blossoming banksides not become places of wine and song. Why should the founding of poetry clubs be the sole prerogative of the whiskered male, and female versificators allowed a voice in the tunable concert of the muses only when some enlightened patriarch sees fit to invite them?

Will you come, then, and rhyme with us? The pathway to my door is swept to receive you and your arrival is eagerly awaited by

Your affectionate Sister,
Tan-chun

When Bao-yu had finished reading, he clapped his hands delightedly.

'Dear Tan-chun! Bless her poetic soul! I must go and discuss this with her straight away.'

He strode off immediately, with Ebony following at his heels. But he had got no further than Drenched Blossoms Pavilion when he saw one of the old nannies on duty at the back gate of the Garden hurrying from the opposite direction with a note in her hand. She came up to him when she saw who he was and handed him the note.

'From Mr Yun, sir. He's waiting at the back gate. He sends his compliments and says would I please give you this.'

Bao-yu opened it and read.

Dear Father,

I have the Honour to present my Humble Duty and hope this finds you as it leaves me in the Best of health, ever since you did me the great Kindness to recognize me as your Son I have been looking for some means of showing my appreciation of your great kindness but so far no opportunity has presented itself, to date. However, thanks to your esteemed Advice I have got to know several Nurserymen also a number of famous gardens and now through this contacts I have come across a very rare Variety of autumn crab flower (Pure White) only very little to be had, but using every means possible I have got two pots of it I hope you will think of me as a real Son and not refuse to keep them for your enjoyment. However, owing to the present Hot Weather I did not like to call in Person as the Young Ladies are outside in the Garden a lot owing to the heat, and not wishing to give Inconvenience

I remain,

Honoured Father,
Your Dutifully and Affected Son,
Jia Yun

Bao-yu laughed when he had finished reading it.

'Is he alone ?' he asked the old woman, 'or is there someone with him?'

'He's got a couple of young chaps with him carrying potted plants.'

'I see. Well go back and thank him for me. Tell him it's very kind of him and I very much appreciate it. And have the pots taken to my room.'

When he had given these instructions, he continued with Ebony on his way to Autumn Studio. He arrived to find that Bao-chai, Dai-yu, Ying-chun and Xi-chun had all got there before him. They laughed excitedly when they saw him enter.

‘Here comes another one!’

‘I hadn’t realized that I was so popular!’ said Tan-chun. ‘I wrote to you all more or less on the spur of the moment. It was no more than a tentative suggestion. I had no idea it would meet with this instant response from everybody.’

‘It’s a pity you didn’t think of it earlier,’ said Bao-yu. ‘We ought to have started a club long ago.’

‘Well *I* don’t think it’s a pity,’ said Dai-yu. ‘Do, by all means, have a poetry club if you’re all so keen to, only count *me* out of it, please. I don’t feel up to it.’

Ying-chun laughed.

‘If you’re not, then what about the rest of us?’

‘This is no time for false modesty,’ said Bao-yu. ‘Here is a serious proposition and one which we are obviously all enthusiastic about. What we need are some ideas that we can all discuss. Come on, Chai! Let’s hear what you have got to say first, then perhaps we can hear from Cousin Lin.’

‘What’s the hurry ?’ said Bao-chai. ‘We’re not even all here yet.’

Just as she was saying that, Li Wan arrived. She smiled at them all as she entered.

‘My! What a poetic lot we are! If you are going to have a poetry club, may I propose myself for president? The idea of having one did in fact occur to me earlier in the year, but I thought that as I can’t write poetry myself, a proposal coming from me might seem a bit presumptuous, and I did nothing about it. Now that my poetical sister-in-law has had the same idea, I should like to do what I can to help her get it Started.’

‘If we are definitely going to have a poetry club,’ said Dai-yu, ‘then as members of the club we are all equals and fellow-poets. We can’t go on calling ourselves “cousin” and “sister-in-law” all the time;’

‘I quite agree,’ said Li Wan. ‘We ought to choose pennames to sign our poems with, then we can use them for addressing each other by as well. I shall call myself “Farmer Sweet-rice”. I don’t suppose anyone else will want that title.’

‘I shall call myself “Autumn Studio”,’ said Tan-chun.

‘That’s pretty unoriginal!’ said Bao-yu. ‘Can’t you do any better than that? You’ve got all those paulownias and plantain-trees around your place: can’t you make a name out of *them?’*

‘All right,’ said Tan-chun. ‘I’m very fond of my plantains. I shall call myself “Under the Plantains”.’

‘That’s very original,’ said the others admiringly. But Dai-yu laughed.

‘Come on, everybody!’ she said. ‘Pop her in the stew-pot! We’ll have a nice piece of venison with our wine.’

As no one could understand this recondite joke, Dai-yu undertook to explain it for them.

“Under the plantains” is where the woodcutter in the old Taoist parable hid the deer he had killed; so the allusion means “a deer”. In calling herself by that pen-name, Cousin Tan is therefore offering herself to her fellow-members as venison for them to feast on in their carousals.’

‘Oh, all right, Miss Clever ！’ said Tan-chun. “‘Plantain Lover”, then. You wait! I’ll be even with you yet. I’ve got just the name for her,’ she told the others. ‘When the Emperor Shun died, his two queens are supposed to have gone along the banks of the river Xiang looking for him. According to the legend, the two queens turned into river goddesses and their tears became the spots you find on the bamboos that grow along the banks of the river. That’s why there’s a kind of bamboo called “Naiad’s Tears”. Well now, Cousin Dai lives in the Naiad’s House, and she cries so much that I shouldn’t be at all surprised if one of these days the bamboos in her courtyard all turned out to have spots on them; so I think the best pen-name for her would be “River Queen”.’

The others, applauding, agreed that this was *exactly* the tight name for Dai-yu. Dai-yu herself hung her head

and said nothing.

'I've thought of one for Bao-chai,' said Li Wan. 'Not regal, like Dai-yu's, but aristocratic, at any rate. What do you all think of "Lady All-spice"?'

'I think the title becomes her very well,' said Tan-chun.

'What about me?' said Bao-yu. 'Isn't anyone going to think of a name for me?'

'Oh, *you!'* said Bao-chai. 'The obvious. one for you is "Busybody"—because you are always so busy doing nothing.'

'Why not stick to your old pen-name, "Lord of the Flowers" ?' said Li Wan.

'Do you *have* to embarrass me by reminding me of my youthful indiscretions ?' said Bao-yu.

'No, let *me* choose your name,' said Bao-chai, 'Actually I've already thought of one. It sounds a bit common, perhaps, but I think it suits you. You are a very *lucky* person, living in such luxurious and beautiful surroundings and you enjoy an exceptional amount of leisure—in fact, I can't think of anyone who combines quite so much luck with quite so much leisure—so I suggest "Lucky Lounger" as the most suitable pen-name for you.'

Bao-yu laughed good-humouredly.

'You are flattering me! I think you'd better all call me by whatever name each of you fancies.'

'No, that won't do,' said Dai-yu. 'As you live in the House of **Green** Delights, why don't we simply call you "**Green** Boy"?'

'Yes,' said the others. 'Good.'

'Now, what names are we going to have for Cousin Ying and Cousin Xi?' said Li Wan.

'Neither of us is much good at poetry,' said Ying-chun. 'There doesn't seem much point in having any.'

'No, I think you *ought* to have pen-names,' said Tan-chun.

'As Ying-chun lives on Amaryllis Eyot, she could be "Amaryllis Islander", and as Xi-chun lives by the Lotus Pavilion, she could be "Lotus Dweller",' said Bao-chai. 'That would seem to be the simplest solution.'

'Yes,' said Li Wan. 'Those names will do very nicely. Now, I'm the eldest here, so I'm going to propose some conditions that I'd like you all to agree to. I don't think you'll have much difficulty in doing so when you've heard what they are. The first one is that as three out of the seven of us founding this club—that's to say Cousin Ying, Cousin Xi and myself—are no good at writing poetry, I propose that the rest of you should let us off versifying and allow us to act as your officers instead.'

'"*Cousin* Ying"? "*Cousin* Xi"?' said Tan-chun. 'What's the good of inventing all these new names if you're not going to use them? I think that from now on there ought to be a penalty for not using them.'

'First things first,' said Li Wan. 'Let's get the club properly founded, and we can talk about penalties later on. I suggest that the club should hold its meetings at my place, because I've got the most room. I can't write poetry myself, but if you don't object to having so illiterate a person as your host, I'm sure that as time goes by I shall grow more poetical and refined under your influence.

'My next condition is that you should make me your president. And as I shan't be able to manage all the official business on my own, I should like to be allowed to co-opt two vice-presidents. I therefore nominate Amaryllis Islander and Lotus Dweller as my assistants, one to set the themes and rhymes in our competitions and the other to act as invigilator and copyist.

'And lastly, although we three officers don't *have* to do any versifying, we should not be precluded from trying our hand at it if we want to. So if there is ever a fairly simple subject with easy rhymes and we feel like joining in, we should be allowed to do so. The rest of you, of course, have no option.

‘Well, those are my conditions. If you agree to them, I’ll be glad to help you found the club. If not, I don’t think there would really be much point in my tagging along.’

The proposed arrangement was highly agreeable to Ying-chun and Xi-chun, neither of whom had much enthusiasm for writing poetry—least of all in competition with experts like Bao-chai and Dai-yu—and they assented readily. The rest, when they saw how willingly Ying-chun and Xi-chun acquiesced, felt that they could scarcely object themselves and added their assent— though Tan-chun did remark, somewhat ruefully, that it seemed a little hard, when she was the one who had thought of the idea in the first place, that she should now have these other three sitting in judgement over her.

‘Right,’ said Bao-yu. ‘That’s all settled. Let’s all move over to Sweet-rice Village, then.’

‘You’re always in such a hurry!’ said Li Wan. ‘Today’s meeting is just a preliminary discussion. Now you will have to wait for me to issue an invitation.’

‘Before we do anything else,’ said Bao-chai, ‘we had better decide how often we are going to meet.’

‘Not too often, I hope,’ said Tan-chun, ‘otherwise it will no longer be a pleasure. I suggest not more than two or three times a month.’

‘Twice a month will be quite enough,’ said Bao-chai. ‘Once we’ve decided which two days to meet on, we should under-take *always* to turn up on those two days, wet or fine. At the same time, we should be allowed to arrange additional meetings outside the fixed dates as and when the fancy takes any of us to do so. If we leave it that much flexible, it will be more enjoyable.’

The others agreed that this was a good proposal and should be adopted.

‘The poetry club was originally my idea,’ said Tan-chun. ‘I hope you will at least allow me the pleasure of being your hostess at its first meeting.’

‘All right,’ said Li Wan. ‘We’ll have a meeting tomorrow and you shall entertain us,’

Why wait until tomorrow?’ said Tan-chun. ‘There’s no time like the present. *You* choose a title for us, Amaryllis Islander can set the rhymes, and Lotus Dweller can supervise us while we compose our poems.’

‘If you ask me,’ said Ying-chun, ‘I think that rather than always have the same two people to choose the titles and set the rhymes, it would be better to draw lots.’

‘As I was on my way here just now,’ said Li Wan, ‘I saw them carrying in two pots of white crab-blossom. It was so pretty. Couldn’t you have white crab-blossom for your subject?’

‘We haven’t all seen it yet,’ said Ying-chun. ‘How are they going to write poems about it if they haven’t seen it?’

‘We all know what white crab-blossom looks like,’ said Bao-chai. ‘I don’t see why we necessarily have to look at it in order to be able to write a poem about it. The ancients used a poetic theme as a vehicle for whatever feelings they happened to want to express at that particular moment. If they’d waited until they’d *seen* the objects they were supposed to be writing about, the poems would never have got written!’

‘Very well, then, I’ll set your rhymes,’ said Ying-chun.

She took a book of verse off the shelf, opened it at random, and held it up for the others to see.

‘There you are: an octet in Regulated Verse. That’s the form.’

She closed the book again and turned to a little maid who was leaning in the doorway looking on.

‘Give us a word,’ she said. ‘Any word.’

‘Door,’ said the girl.

‘That means the first line must end with “door”,’ said Ying-chun. She turned again to the girl: ‘Another one.’

‘Pot,’ said the girl.

‘Right, “pot”,’ said Ying-chun, and going over to a little nest of drawers in which rhyme-cards were kept, she pulled out one of them and asked the maid to select two cards from it at random. These turned out to be the cards for ‘not’ and ‘spot,.

‘Now,’ she said to the girl, ‘pick any card out of any drawer. Just one.’

The girl pulled out another drawer and picked out the card for ‘day’.

‘All right,’ said Ying-chun. ‘That means that your first line must end in “door”, your second in “pot”, your fourth in “not”, your sixth in spot ,and the rhyming couplet in the seventh and eighth lines must end in “day

Tan-chun’s maid Scribe laid out four identical sets of brushes and paper for the competitors, who all, except Dai-yu, now began, with quiet concentration, to consider what they were going to write. Dai-yu wandered around outside, playing with the bark of the paulownia trees, admiring the signs of autumn in the garden, occasionally joking with the maids, and in general not giving the slightest indication that she was engaged in the throes of composition. Ying-chun told one of the maids to light a stick of Sweet Dreams—a kind of incense which is only about three inches long and has a very thick wick so that it burns down fairly rapidly - and told the competitors that they had to complete their poems by the time the incense had burned itself out, otherwise they would be penalized.

Tan-chun soon had a poem ready. Taking up a brush, she wrote it out and, after going over it and making a few corrections, handed it in to Ying-chun. Then she turned to Bao-chai.

‘How are *you* doing, Lady All-spice? Have *you* thought of a poem yet?’

‘Well—yes, I’ve thought of *something*,’ said Bao-chai, ‘but I’m not very happy about it.’

Bao-yu, meanwhile, was pacing up and down, hands clasped behind his back, in the loggia outside. Hearing this exchange, he paused to address Dai-yu.

‘Do you hear that?’ he said. ‘The other two have nearly finished.’

‘Kindly mind your own business, would you?’ said Dai-yu. Bao-yu glanced inside and saw that Bao-chai was busy writing her poem down.

‘Lord I’ he said. ‘There’s only an inch left.’ He turned to Dai-yu again: ‘The incense has nearly burned out. What are you still squatting over there on the damp grass for?’

Dai-yu ignored him.

‘Oh well,’ said Bao-yu. ‘I haven’t got time to worry about you. I’ll have to start writing my own now, whether it’s any good or not.’

He went in then, and sat down at the table to write.

‘I’m going to start reading the poems now,’ said Li Wan. ‘Anyone who hasn’t handed in by the time I’ve finished reading will have to pay a fine.’

‘Farmer Sweet-rice may not be much good at *writing* poetry,’ said Bao-yu, ‘but she is jolly good at *reading* it. She’s a very fair critic. I’m sure we shall all be willing to accept her judgement.’ The others nodded in agreement. Li Wan picked up Tan-chun’s draft and the others crowded round to read it with her:

A wintry sunset gilds the vine-wreathed door
Where stands, mossed by old rains, the flower-pot.
Its snowy blooms, as snow impermanent,
Are pure as pure white jade that alters not.
O fragrant frailty, that so fears the wind!

Most radiant whiteness! Pull moon without spot!
White flower-sprite, shake your silken wings! Away!
And join with me to hymn the dying day!

All complimented Tan-chun on her poem when they had finished reading it. Then they looked at Bao-chai's:

Guard the sweet scent behind closed courtyard door,
And with prompt waterings dew the mossy pot!
The carmine hue their summer sisters wore
These snowy autumn blossoms envy not—
Pot beauty in plain whiteness best appears,
And only in white jade is found no spot.
Chaste, lovely flowers! Silent, they seem to pray
To autumn's White God at the close of day.

Li Wan smiled.

'That has the All-spice touch all right!' Next they looked at Bao-yu's poem.

White Autumn's sister stands beside the door;
Like summer snow her blossoms till the pot—
A Yang-fei rising naked from the bath,
With a cool, chaste allure that she had not.
The dawn wind could not dry those pearly tears
With which night's rain each floweret's eye did spot.
Pensive and grave, her blossoms gently sway,
While a sad flute laments the dying day[5].

When they had finished reading, Bao-yu said he liked Tan-chun's poem best of the three, but Li Wan insisted that Bao-chai's was superior. It had 'more character' she said. She was about to press Dai-yu for her contribution when Dai-yu sauntered in of her own volition.

'Oh! have you all finished?'

She picked up a brush and proceeded, writing rapidly and without a pause, to set down the poem that was already completed in her mind. She wrote on the first sheet of paper that came to hand and, having finished, threw it nonchalantly across the table for the others to inspect.

Beside the half-raised blind, the half-closed door,
Crushed ice for earth and white jade for the pot,

They had got no further than the first couplet, when Bao-yu broke out into praises.

'Clever! How do you get these ideas?'

[5] See Appendix I, p. 583

Three parts of whiteness from the pear-tree stolen,
One part from plum for scent (which pear has not)—

All of them were impressed by this second couplet.

'This *is* good. Original. It's quite different from the other three.'

Moon-maidens stitched them with white silken thread,
And virgins' tears the new-made flowers did spot,
Which now, like bashful maids that no word say,
Lean languid on the breeze at close of day.

'Yes, this is the best,' they said. 'This is the best of the four.'

'For elegance and originally, yes,' said Li Wan; 'but for character and depth I prefer Lady All-spice's.'

'I think that's a fair judgement,' said Tan-chun. 'I think River Queen's has to take second place.'

'At all events,' said Li Wan, **'Green** Boy's is bottom. Do you accept that judgement, **Green** Boy?'

'Oh yes,' said Bao-yu. 'It's a perfectly fair one. Mine is just not a good poem. But'—he smiled hopefully—'I think we ought to reconsider the placing of All-spice's and River Queen's contributions.'

'You agreed to abide by my decisions,' said Li Wan. 'I don't think the rest of you have any say in the matter. If anyone questions a decision of mine in future, he will have to pay a penalty.'

Bao-yu was obliged to let the matter drop.

'I propose that our two meetings should be on the second and sixteenth of each month,' said Li Wan. 'On those occasions *I* shall be responsible for choosing the subjects and the rhymes. If any of you ever feels like having an extra meeting in between those dates, there's nothing to stop you. In fact, there's nothing to stop you having a meeting every day, if you feel like it. But that's entirely up to you. On the second and sixteenth you *must* all come round to my place, and the meetings on those two days are my responsibility.'

'We really ought to have a name for the club,' said Bao-yu. 'We don't want anything banal,' said Tan-chun; 'on the other hand we don't want anything too weird and wonderful. As we started off with a poem about white crab-blossom, why don't we simply call ourselves "The Crab-flower Club"? That *might* have seemed a somewhat banal title other things being equal, but in our case it wouldn't be because it would commemorate our founding meeting.'

Tan-chun's proposal was followed by general discussion. After partaking of the liquid and other refreshment which she provided, the party then broke up, some returning to their own apartments in the Garden, some going on to Grandmother Jia's or Lady Wang's apartments outside. Our record leaves them at this point and does not specify.

*

Aroma had been present when Bao-yu received Tan-chun's letter and had seen him rush off excitedly with Ebony as soon as he had finished reading it, but without having any idea what the cause of his excitement might be. Shortly after he left, two of the old women from the back gate arrived carrying pots of white-flowering autumn crab. Aroma asked them who the flowers were from, and when the old women had explained, showed them where she wanted them put, after which she took them into the servants' quartets and made them sit down while

she went off to Bao-yu's room to fetch some money. She weighed out twelve penny-weights of silver and made it into a little parcel, then, taking out an additional three hundred copper cash, hurried back to the old women.

'The silver is to pay the beaters with,' she told them as she handed them the money. 'The cash is for you to buy your-selves a drink with.'

The old women stood up, beaming all over their faces. How kind, how very kind, they said, they couldn't possibly take it. But as Aroma insisted, they allowed themselves to be persuaded.

'Are there any boys on duty outside the gate?' Aroma asked them.

'Oh yes, there are always four there,' said the old women, 'to do any errands you young ladies in the Garden happen to want done outside. If there's anything you want done, Miss, just let us know and we'll get them to do it for you.'

'It isn't for *me*,' said Aroma smiling. 'I wouldn't presume. It's Master Bao. He wants someone to go to the Marquis of Zhong-jing's place to deliver some things to Miss Shi. I thought that now you're here I might as well ask you if you wouldn't mind when you get back telling the boys on the gate to go out and order a cab for me. Only if they do, will you come to me for the fare, please. Don't go bothering them in the front about it.'

The old women departed, promising to do as she asked, while Aroma went back into the main apartment for a saucer to put some of the things on that she was planning to send to Xiang-yun. But when she looked on the dresser she found that the saucer shelf was completely empty. She glanced back to where Skybright, Ripple and Musk sat sewing together.

'What happened to that white onyx saucer that used to be here ?' she asked ?hem.

The girls looked at each other blankly, trying to remember. After some moments, Skybright's face broke into a smile.

'I remember. I took it to Miss Tan's with those lychees on. It's still there.'

'Whatever did you take *that* one for, when there are so many other things you could have used ?'

'Well, yes, that's what *I* said. But the dark brown lychees and the white-and-browny onyx *did* go very well together. Even Miss Tan said how pretty they looked. She made me leave the dish there, where she could look at it. That's why I didn't bring it back with me. By the way, that pair of identical vases that used to be on the very top of the dresser isn't back yet, either.'

'You'll laugh if I tell you about *them*,' said Ripple. 'You know how Master Bao never does anything by halves. Well, the other day he had a sudden rush of dutiful feelings come over him. He'd just picked a couple of sprays of cassia and was going to put them in a vase, when suddenly he said, "Oh! these are the first cassia flowers I've picked this year. I mustn't keep them for my own enjoyment." So what does he do but fetch down those two vases, put the water in them and arrange the flowers in them himself, and go along with them (someone else carrying them, of course) to Her Old Ladyship and Her Ladyship to give them each a vase. Anyway, the beauty of it was that some of the effects of this rubbed off on the person carrying the vases—which it so happens was me. When Her Old Ladyship saw the flowers, she was so delighted you just can't imagine. "Oh, look!" she said. "What a *good* boy he is to me! He can't even see a flower without thinking of his old grannie!—And people grumble at me for being too fond of him!" Well, as I expect you know, Her Old Ladyship normally doesn't seem to have much use for me—I don't know what it is, but there's something about me she doesn't seem to like—but on this occasion she gave me a hundred cash. And she called me a "poor little thing". "Poor little thing!" she said. "She looks so sickly! " I can tell you, I never expected a piece of luck like that I I mean, a hundred cash is nothing, but the honour! - in front of all those people! Then when we got to Her Ladyship's, Her Ladyship was with Mrs Lian and Mrs Zhao going through her chests and looking out some of the things she used to wear when

she was a girl to give to someone—I don't know who it was. Anyway, when she saw us, she left off to admire the flowers. So of course Mrs Lian has to make the most of it by putting in *her* pennyworth going on about how dutiful Master Bao is and how thoughtful and how this that and the other I can't remember a half of what she said, there was a whole cartload of it - but whatever it was it gave Her Ladyship a lot of face, hearing him praised like that in front of everybody, and You Know Who not being able to say a word against him, so of course *she* was very pleased. And what do you think? She gave me *two dresses!* Admittedly, we get new dresses every year, so in itself being given two dresses may not seem so wonderful. But the *honour* I'

'Pooh!' said Skybright. 'Silly girl! *You* don't know much! Those would be two dresses that she thought weren't good enough to give to the other person. I can't see much honour in *that!'*

'I don't care,' said Ripple. 'It was still very kind of Her Ladyship, for all that.'

'If it had been me, I shouldn't have wanted them,' said Skybright. 'What? take someone else's old left-overs? All of us here are only maids; none of us is supposed to be any higher than the rest, you know. Why should she give someone else the best and give me the left-overs? No, I'm sorry. *I* should have had to refuse, even if it meant offending her. I couldn't take a thing like that lying down!

'Which of us was it that she gave those other dresses to?'
said Ripple, curious. 'I've been home ill these last few days. I
must have been away when it happened. Be a sport, Skyey—tell us who it was!'

'Why, if I tell you, will you give those dresses back again?'

'Of course not, silly! I'd just like to *know,'* said Ripple. 'I don't care if it was Master Bao's little puppy-dog she gave them to, I still think Her Ladyship meant to do me a kindness, and as far as I'm concerned, that's all that matters.'

The other maids laughed.

'You'd better watch what you say! That's just who she *did* give them to: Master Bao's little dog, Flower.'

'Wicked girls!' said 'Flowers' Aroma, laughing in spite of herself, 'taking my name in vain! Whenever you've got a few moments to spare you are making fun of me. There's not one of you that will come to a good end!

'Oh, it was *you,'* said Ripple. 'I'm go sorry, I didn't realize. Oh, I do apologize.'

'All right, that's enough fooling for now,' said Aroma. 'The question is, which of you is going to get that saucer?'

'Better get the vases back too, while we're about it,' said Musk. 'The one in Her *Old* Ladyship's room should be safe enough, but I wouldn't be too sure about the one at Her Ladyship's. There are so many people in and out of that place
especially You Know Who and her lot. If they see anything from *our* room in there, they're sure to find some way of breaking it accidentally-on-purpose, if they get half a chance. Her Ladyship won't stop them. She never notices. We ought to get that one back, at least, as soon as we can.'

'You're right,' said Skybright, laying down her sewing. 'I'll go and get it now.'

'No, I'll go for that,' said Ripple. 'You go and get your saucer.'

'I'm going for the vase,' said Skybright. 'Why should you have all the windfalls? You others have all had a go. Now it's my turn.'

'You do exaggerate,' said Musk. 'It's only Ripple who's had the luck. And it was only because of the coincidence that Her Ladyship happened to be going through her dresses when she arrived. Do you suppose she'll be going through them again if you go there now ?'

‘Maybe not,’ said Skybright, with a tinge of malice. ‘On the other hand maybe she’ll notice how conscientious I am and pay me two taels a month out of her allowance. You see’—she paused to add this on her way out of the room—‘*I* know what goes on in here. There’s no need for the play-acting.’

She ran off with a mocking laugh.

Ripple went, too, and fetched the onyx saucer from Tan-chun’s room, after which Aroma made ready the things that were to go to Xiang-yun, and called in old Mamma Song One of the nannies attached to **Green** Delights—to give her instructions for their delivery.

‘Get yourself smartened up and change into your best things,’ she said. ‘I want you to go out presently and take some things for me to Miss Shi’s.’

‘You can give them to me now, Miss—and any message that you want me to deliver,’ said Mamma Song; ‘then I can go off straight away, as soon as I’ve got myself ready.’

Aroma fetched two little boxes of lacquer and bamboo basketwork and taking the tops off them, put foxnuts and caltrops in one and a saucerful of chestnut fudge (made of chestnut puree steam-cooked with cassia-flavored sugar) in the other.

‘These are all our own things or *made* from our own things freshly gathered in the Garden that Master Bao is sending Miss Shi a taste of,’ she said. ‘Tell her the onyx saucer the fudge is on is the one she was admiring last time she was here and she is to keep it. This silk bag has got the sewing in that she asked me to do for her. Tell her the needlework’s a bit on the rough side, but I’m sure she’ll understand. And say Master Bao sends his regards. And of course *I* present my compliments. I think that’s all.’

‘Isn’t there any message from Master Bao ?’ said Mamma Song. ‘Perhaps you’d better ask him, Miss, just in case. We don’t want him saying afterwards that we’ve forgotten something.’

‘Didn’t he go round just now to Miss Tan’s place?’ Aroma asked Ripple.

‘Yes,’ said Ripple. ‘They’re *all* round there. They were having a discussion about setting up a poetry club, whatever that might be, and they were writing poems, some of them.’ She turned to Mamma Song. ‘I shouldn’t think he’d have anything to say. I should just push on, if I were you.’

Mamma Song took up the boxes and went off to get herself ready.

‘When you are ready, go out by the *back* gate,’ said Aroma as she was leaving. ‘You’ll find some of the boys there and a cab waiting for you.’

Mamma Song then left. The details of her expedition are unrecorded.

*

Some time after this Bao-yu got back. The first thing he did on arrival was to go and look at the autumn crab-flowers. When he had finished admiring them, he went into the house and told Aroma all about the poetry club, after which Aroma told him how she had sent Mamma Song to Shi Xiang-yun’s with a present of things from the Garden. Bao-yu smote his palms together in vexation.

‘Oh, we forgot about *her!* I knew there was something we ought to have done and hadn’t, but I couldn’t think what it was. I’m glad you’ve reminded me. We must invite her over at once, of course. The poetry club will be nothing without her in it.

‘I don’t think I’d be in such a hurry to, if I were you,’ said Aroma. ‘It’s only an amusement, this poetry thing, and Miss Shi doesn’t have the time for amusement that the rest of you do. It isn’t as if she were her own mistress, you know. Even if you tell her about this and she wants to come, it doesn’t follow that they’ll let her.

Suppose they don't. She'll only fret about it; and then all you'll have done will be to have made her feel miserable for nothing.'

'That's no problem,' said Bao-yu. 'I shall ask Her Old Ladyship to have her fetched.'

Just then Mamma Song got back, mission completed, bearing Xiang-yun's thanks to Aroma for the things.

'She asked me what Master Bao was doing,' said the nannie, 'so I told her that he and the young ladies were starting a poetry club or some such. She was very upset. "Oh!" she said, "are they writing poetry? I wish they'd have told me about it!"'

Bao-yu waited to hear no more. Dashing round to his grandmother's, he insisted that she should send instantly to have Xiang-yun fetched.

'It's too late *now,*' said Grandmother Jia. 'We'll send for her first thing tomorrow.'

Bao-yu had to be content with that, and went back to his room much downcast. He was round at Grandmother Jia's first thing next morning again, pestering; but it was not until the early afternoon that Xiang-yun eventually arrived and his equanimity was restored.

As soon as they were all together, Bao-yu began to tell Xiang-yun how the club had come to be founded and what they had done at its first meeting. He was about to show her the poems that they had written, but Li Wan prevented him.

'Don't let her see them yet,' she said. 'Just tell her the rhymes. As she missed our first meeting, her penalty shall be to make up another poem now, using the same rhymes that we did. If it's all right, we shall invite her to join the club straight away. If not, she must first entertain us all at our next meeting as a further penalty.'

'I like that!' said Xiang-yun, laughing. '*You* should be the ones to pay a penalty, for having forgotten to invite me. Well, show me the rhymes, then. I'm not much good at this sort of thing, but I don't mind making a fool of myself. As long as you'll let me join your club, I don't mind *what* I have to do sweep the floor and light the incense for you, if you like!'

Delighted to see her so enthusiastic, and still reproaching themselves for having forgotten about her at their inaugural meeting, the rest of them made haste to give her the rhyme-words so that she could begin.

Xiang-yun was much too excited for careful composition. Having, even while they were all talking, concocted a number of verses in her head, she took up a brush and proceeded to write them down, without a single pause for correction, on the first piece of paper that came to hand.

'There you are!' she said, handing it to the others. 'I've written two poems using the rhymes you gave me. I don't know whether they're any good or not, but at least I have done what was told!'

'We thought our four had just about scraped the barrel,' they told her. 'We couldn't have written *one* more poem on the subject, let alone two I Whatever can you have found to say in them? I bet they just repeat what we said in ours.'

But when they looked at the poems, this is what they read.

1

Of late a goddess came down to my door
And planted seeds of white jade in a pot,
From which a wondrous white Frost Maiden grew,
Who, loving cold, all other things loves not.
Last night a cloud passed by, whose autumn shower

Her cold, unweeping eyes with tears did spot;
Since when, the poet here takes up his stay,
To praise her loveliness by night and day.

2

Where flower-fringed steps approach the ivied door,
At the wall's foot or in a graceful pot—
What flowers do more sad autumn-thoughts inspire
Than these, whose pureness others rival not?
Wax teats their petals seem, by wind congealed,
Or filtered moonlight, flecked with many a spot.
Weep they because the shadows stole away
Their goddess-queen, who now makes dark night day?

The reading of these poems was punctuated at the end of each line with expressions of admiration and surprise, and when they had got to the end, all of them agreed that these two poems had made the exercise a worth-while one and fully justified their naming the new society 'The Crab-flower Club'.

'You must let me provide the refreshments tomorrow as my penalty,' said Xiang-yun. 'I hope you will all consent to be my guests.'

'Splendid!' they said; and proceeded to show her the poems they had written the day before, and to discuss them with her.

*

That evening Bao-chai, who had invited xiang-yun to spend the night with her at Allspice Court, sat with her guest under the lamplight while the latter discussed themes for the morrow's meeting and plans for the projected entertainment. As it became increasingly apparent that her ideas on the subject were quite impracticable, Bao-chai presently interrupted the flow.

'The club has only just been founded and this will be its first entertainment,' she said. 'Although it's all only a game, you are setting a precedent, so you need to think about it rather carefully. If the entertainment is to be equally enjoyable for everyone, you don't want it to be too much of a burden on *you;* but on the other hand you don't want the others to feel that they are being given short commons. Now, you are not your own mistress, and the few strings of cash they give you a month at home are not even enough £or your own needs. And if your Aunt got to hear that you were spending money on a frivolous thing like this, she would have still more to grumble about than usual. In any case, even if you spent all you'd got, it still wouldn't be enough to provide an entertainment for several people. So what are you going to do? You obviously can't send home for money. Are you going to ask them here for some?'

Xiang-yun, brought back to the realities of her situation, was very much dashed. While she hesitated, Bao-chai went on.

'Actually I've thought of a way out of this. An assistant in one of our pawnshops comes from a place where they have very good crabs. Now nearly everyone here from Lady Jia and Aunt Wang downwards is fond of crabs

and only the other day Aunt Wang was saying that we ought to have a crab and cassia-viewing party for Lady Jia. It's only because she has been otherwise occupied that she hasn't done anything about it. Why not issue a general invitation, making no mention of the poetry club—we can write all the poems we want to after the rest of them have gone—and I shall ask my brother to let us have a few baskets of the biggest, fattest-looking crabs and tell him to get us a few jars of good wine and side-dishes for four or five tables from the shop? That should save a lot of trouble for you *and* make more of an occasion of it for everybody else.'

Xiang-yun felt deeply grateful to Bao-chai and praised her warmly for her thoughtfulness. Bao-chai smiled deprecatingly.

'Now you mustn't go imagining things and feel that you are being treated like a poor relation! It's only because I am so fond of you that I have ventured to make this proposal. If you promise you won't take it amiss, I can get them to arrange it for us straight away.'

'My dearest girl!' said Xiang-yun. 'Of course I shan't take it amiss! How can you suggest such a thing? If you do so again, I shall begin to think that you aren't really fond of me at all! I may be a silly goose, but there *are* some things I understand! Do you think that if I didn't look on you as my own true sister I should ever have told you last time I was here about all those tiresome things I have to put up with at home?'

Reassured, Bao-chai called in an old woman to take a message outside to her brother.

'Tell Mr Pan to get us a few baskets of crabs like the ones we had the other day. It's for after lunch tomorrow. We're having a cassia-viewing party in the Garden for Their Lady-ships. Tell him *please* not to forget, because I've already invited all the guests.'

The old woman went off to deliver her message. In due course she reported back again—but these are details omitted from our story.

Bao-chai resumed her conversation with Xiang-yun.

'About the theme for tomorrow's poems,' she said. 'We don't want anything too outlandish. If you look at the works of the great poets, you find that *they* didn't go in for the weird and wonderful titles and "daring" rhymes that people nowadays are so fond of. Outlandish themes and daring rhymes do not produce good poetry. They merely show up the poverty of the writer's ideas. Certainly one wants to avoid clichés; but one can easily go too far in the pursuit of novelty. The important thing is to have fresh ideas. If one has fresh ideas, one does not need to worry about clichés: the words take care of themselves. But what am I saying all this for? Spinning and sewing is the proper occupation for girls like us. Any time we have left over from that should be spent in reading a few pages of some improving book—not on this sort of thing!'

'Yes' said Xiang-yun, without much conviction; but presently smiled as a new idea occurred to her.

'I've just thought of something. Yesterday's theme was "White Crab-blossom". The flower *I'd* like to write about is the chrysanthemum. Couldn't we have "Chrysanthemums" as our theme for tomorrow?'

'It is certainly a very seasonable one,' said Bao-chai. 'The trouble is that so many people have written about it before.'

'Yes,' said Xiang-yun, 'I suppose it *is* rather a hackneyed one.'

Bao-chai thought for a bit.

'Unless of course you somehow involved the *poet* in the theme,' she said. 'You could do that by making up verb-object or concrete-abstract tides in which "chrysanthemums" was the concrete noun or the object of the verb as the case might be. Then your poem would be both a celebration of chrysanthemums and at the same time a description of some action or situation. Such a treatment of the subject *has* been tried in the past, but it is a much less hackneyed one. The combining of narrative and lyrical elements in a single treatment makes for freshness

and greater freedom.'

'It sounds a splendid idea,' said Xiang-yun. 'But what sort of verbs or abstract nouns had you in mind? Can you give me an example?'

Bao-chai thought for a bit.

'What about "The Dream of the Chrysanthemums" ?'

'Yes, that's a good one,' said xiang-yun. 'I've thought of one too. Couldn't we have "The Shadow of the Chrysanthemums"?'

'Ye-e-es,' said Bao-chai, doubtfully. 'The trouble is, it's been used before. Still, if we had a *lot* of tides we could probably slip it in. I've thought of another.'

'Well, come on then!' said Xiang-yun.

'What about "Questioning the Chrysanthemums"?'

Xiang-yun slapped the table appreciatively.

'That's a lovely one!' Presently she added: 'I've thought of another. What do you think of "Seeking the Chrysanthemums"?'

'That should be interesting,' said Bao-chai. 'Let's start making a list. We'll write down up to ten titles and then see what we think of them.'

The two of them busied themselves for some minutes grinding ink and softening a brush. xiang-yun then proceeded to write down the titles at Ban-chai's dictation. Soon they had ten. Xiang-yun read them over.

'Ten doesn't make a set,' she said. 'We need two more to make a round dozen, then we shall have just the right number for a little album.'

Ban-chai supplied two more without too much difficulty.

'If we're thinking in terms of a *sequence* of poems,' she said, 'we may as well, while we're about it, arrange these titles in some sort of order.'

'That's it!' said xiang-yun. 'Then they will be all ready for making our "Chrysanthemum Album" with afterwards.'

"'Remembering the Chrysanthemums" should come first,' said Bao-chai.

'Now, let's see. When you remember them, you realize you haven't got any, so you go and look for some. So "Seeking the Chrysanthemums" will be the second title.

'Well, having found some, you will want to plant them; so "Planting the Chrysanthemums" will be the third title.

'After you've planted them and the flowers have come out, you'll want to stand and look at them; so the fourth title will be "Admiring the Chrysanthemums".

'You won't be able to have enough of them by just standing and admiring them, so you'll naturally want to pick some and arrange them in a vase so that you can enjoy them indoors. That means "Arranging the Chrysanthemums" for Number Five.

'But however much you enjoy them, you will feel that they somehow lack their full lustre without words to grace them, and so you will want to celebrate them in verse. That means "Celebrating the Chrysanthemums" will be the sixth title.

'Well now, let's suppose you've just finished writing some verses about them. You've got the ink ready-made and the brush is still in your hand and you feel like paying the chrysanthemums a further tribute. What should you do but paint them? That's Number Seven. "Painting the Chrysanthemums".

'Now in spite of these silent tributes, you still don't know the secret of the chrysanthemums' mysterious

charm and you can't resist asking them. Which brings us to Number Eight "Questioning the Chrysanthemums

'And if the chrysanthemums could really reply, it would be so delightful that you would want to have them near you all the time - and how better than by "Wearing the Chrysanthemums"? That's Number Nine.

'That brings us to the end of the verb-object titles which involve the poet himself as the understood subject of the action. But there remain other kinds of treatment, in which we consider the flowers by themselves without postulating the presence of the poet. So we have "The Shadow of the Chrysanthemums" and "The Dream of the Chrysanthemums" as Numbers Ten and Eleven.

'And of course "The Death of the Chrysanthemums" at the end of the album to round off on a suitable note of melancholy.

'There you are I All three months of autumn condensed into a single sequence of a dozen poems!'

Xiang-yun recopied the twelve titles in the order that Bao-chai had indicated, then, after running her eye rapidly over them, she asked Bao-chai what rhyme-scheme they should set.

'I have always disliked set rhymes,' said Bao-chai. 'If you have a good poem in the making, why shackle it with the constraints of an arbitrary rhyme-scheme? Let us leave set rhymes to vulgar pedants; all *we* need do is give out the titles and let the others choose their own rhyme-schemes for themselves. After all, the object of the exercise is to give people enjoyment—the enjoyment gained by producing an occasional felicitous line. We aren't out to make things difficult for them.'

'I entirely agree,' said Xiang-yun. 'And I am sure that in this way we shall get better poems. There's just one thing, though: we have twelve titles now but only five people writing poems. Presumably we aren't going to ask each of them to produce a poem for every one of the titles ?'

'Oh no, that would be *much* too difficult,' said Bao-chai. 'Make a fair copy of the list of titles, merely indicating that the poems are to be octets in Regulated Verse, put it up on the wall where everyone can see it, and then simply let them choose whichever titles they like. If anyone has the energy to do them all, they are welcome to try. If they can't manage more than one, let them do just one. Skill and speed are what we shall be looking for. As soon as all of the twelve tides have been covered, we shall call a halt, and anyone who goes on writing after that will be made to pay a penalty.'

Xiang-yun did not see that this last stipulation was necessary, but otherwise agreed with her, and the two girls, having satisfied themselves that their plans for the morrow were now complete, put out the light and composed themselves for sleep.

As to the outcome of their plans: that will be told in the following chapter.

CHAPTER 38

River Queen triumphs in her treatment of chrysanthemum themes
And Lady Allspice is satirical on the subject of crabs

THE last chapter concluded with Ban-chai and Xiang-yun retiring *for* the night after their plans for the morrow had been completed. This one begins next morning, when Xiang-yun invited Grandmother Jia and the rest to a cassia-viewing party in the Garden. Touched by her enthusiasm, the grown-ups readily agreed to go.

'She is so excited, bless her!' said Grandmother Jia. 'We ought to let her do this, even though she *is* our guest.'

And having promised, she was as good as her word, and arrived in the Garden at noon, bringing Lady Wang, Wang Xi-feng and Aunt Xue with her and a number of attendant maids.

'Now where is it going to be?' she asked them.

'Wherever you like, Mother,' said Lady Wang dutifully.

'I think they've already prepared for us in the Lotus Pavilion,' said Xi-feng. 'The blossom on the two cassia-trees is particularly line there this year, and there is that lovely clear, emerald water. When you sit in the little centre pavilion, you have water all round you, which gives you a wonderful feeling of spaciousness. And looking at water is so restful for the eyes.'

'Very well,' said Grandmother Jia, and began to lead the way to the Lotus Pavilion.

The pavilion was built in the middle of the Garden's little river at one of the places where it broadened into a wide, deep pool. It had windows all round it and could be approached either circuitously from one side by way of one of the two many-angled covered piers leading to its left and right-hand verandahs, or more directly from the other by means of a bamboo bridge leading to the centre of the verandah at the back. It was towards this bamboo bridge that the party was now making its way. As Grandmother Jia stepped on to it, Xi-feng hurried forward to support her.

'You can put your feet down as hard as you like, Grannie,' she said. 'Bamboo bridges always creak like this when you go over them. They are *meant* to.'

The Lotus Pavilion was in reality not one pavilion but two, for the main pavilion properly so called gave on to a smaller pavilion, referred to simply as 'the water pavilion' or the centre pavilion', which was in the very middle of the little lake.

When they were all inside the main pavilion, they noticed that two bamboo tables had been set out on the verandah. On one of them were ranged winecups, chopsticks and all things needful for serving wine, and on the other were teacups, teapots, tea-whisks, saucers, and various other tea4hings. Beside the tea-table two or three maids were busy fanning a little tripod stove on which water for tea-making was being boiled, while at the other end of the verandah maids were fanning a stove on which water for warming the wine-kettles was being heated. Grandmother Jia was particularly impressed by the arrangements for tea-making and remarked with pleasure how *clean* everything looked—including the spot that had been chosen for the party.

'Cousin Bao-chai helped me get it ready,' said Xiang-yun. 'Well, I've always said she was a thoughtful child,' said Grandmother Jia. 'A lot of thought has certainly gone into these preparations.'

As she was speaking, her eye fell on a pair of boards that hung from two of the pillars. The couplet inscribed on them was in mother-o'-pearl inlay on a black lacquer background. She asked Xiang-yun to read it out to her. This is what it said:

Lotus reflections shatter at the dip of a lazy oar-blade
Lotus fragrances float up from the swirl round a bamboo bridge-pile

After hearing the couplet, Grandmother Jia glanced up at the horizontal board which bore the name of the pavilion and was in characters large enough for her to read herself. She turned to Aunt Xue, who was standing beside her.

'When I was a girl, there was a pavilion like this one in our garden at home. It was called—let me see—"Above the Clouds" because of the sky reflected in the water below, you see. When I was about the same age as these young people are now, I used to go with the others every day there to play. One day I slipped and fell down into

the water. I nearly drowned. They had a terrible job getting me out. And even then I caught my head on one of the wooden pegs on the way up. I've still got a place big enough to put the tip of a linger in where it hit me. It's on the side here, just where the hair begins. Of course, at the time everyone thought it was Al up with me. They were sure that after being all that time in the water I'd catch my death of cold. But I got over it.'

'If you hadn't,' said Xi-feng before anyone else could speak, 'what would have happened to all the good fortune you've enjoyed, Grannie? It's obvious you were meant to have it, otherwise why would you have been given that dent in your head? The guardian spirits must have put it there to store your good fortune in. Old Longevity has got a dent in his head, too; only *his* has got so much good fortune packed into it that it bulges out a bit.'

This comical allusion to the God of Longevity's enormous cranium set all of them laughing— including, of course, the old lady herself.

'Naughty monkey!' she said. 'Make fun of me, would you? I'd like to tear that wicked mouth of yours!'

'It's because I wanted to make you laugh, Grannie. Laughter makes the humours circulate. We're going to be eating crabs shortly, and I was afraid that the cold of the crab-meat might settle on your heart. If I can make you laugh and stir your humours up, you'll be able to eat as much crab as you like without taking any harm from it.'

'In that case I shall have to keep you with me all the time, so that I am *always* laughing,' said Grandmother Jia. 'I'll have to stop you going home at night.'

'It's because you indulge her so much that she is so cheeky, Mother,' said Lady Wang. 'By saying things like that to her you will make her even worse.'

'But I *like* her cheekiness I' said Grandmother Jia. 'After all, there's no harm in it. She knows what's what underneath it all, of course she does. I think it's nice that the young people should feel free to joke and laugh a bit when we are all on our own together. We don't want them behaving like a lot of stuffed dummies, surely?'

While she was saying this, they all passed into the smaller pavilion, where tea was served, after which Xi-feng came bustling in with winecups and chopsticks and began to lay. Grandmother Jia sat with Aunt Xue, Bao-chai, Dai-yu and Bao-yu at a centre table, and Xiang-yun, Lady Wang, Ying-chun, Tan-chun and Xi-chun at a table on the east side of the room. A little table was laid for Xi4eng and Li Wan on the west side of the doorway, but this was only for form's sake, since both of them remained on their feet in order to wait on the other two tables.

'We shan't want all the crabs at once,' said Xi-feng to the servants bringing them in. 'Ten will be enough to start with. The others can go back into the steamer.'

She called for some water, and after washing her hands, stood at the centre table facing Grandmother Jia and began shelling the crabs. She offered the first meat, as a courtesy, to Aunt Xue.

'No thank you,' said Aunt Xue. 'I don't need anyone to do it for me. I like doing it myself and getting crabby fingers. I think they taste better when you eat them with your fingers.'

Xi-feng gave the crab-meat she had prepared to Grandmother Jia. The second lot she offered to Bao-yu. Then she called for some 'really hot wine'. She also sent a little maid to fetch mung-bean flour scented with chrysanthemum leaves and cassia for cleaning the lingers with and removing the smell of crab.

Xiang-yun sat with the others at her own table for a while, but as soon as she had finished her first crab, got up to look after her guests. She also went outside and gave orders for a plate of crabs to be taken to Aunt Zhao and another to Aunt Zhou. At once Xi-feng came bearing down on her.

'*You're* not used to this. You get on with your eating and leave this to me! I'll have mine when the rest of

you have finished.'

But Xiang-yun, refusing to be put off, ordered a long table to be laid on the verandah at the far side of the Lotus Pavilion and invited the maids Faithful, Amber, Sunset, Suncloud and Patience to come and sit at it.

Faithful glanced laughingly in Xi-feng direction.

'I can't very well sit down and eat while Mrs Lian is waiting on everybody.'

'That's all right,' said Xi-feng. 'You all go and sit down. I'll take care of everything.'

At that Xiang-yun, too, went back to her seat.

Li Wan and Xi-feng now made a brief pretence of joining in the party, but Xi-feng was soon on her feet again ministering to the rest. After a few minutes she went out on to the verandah, where Faithful and the other maids were regaling themselves with great gusto. They rose to their feet when they saw her come.

'What have you come Out here for, Mrs Lian?' said Faithful. 'Can't you leave us alone to enjoy ourselves for a bit?'

'Well, aren't you disagreeable!' said Xi-feng. 'Here am I doing all the work for you, but instead of thanks I get grumbled at! I was hoping you would offer me a drink.'

Faithful, laughing, quickly filled a winecup and held it to Xi-feng lips. Tilting her head back, Xi-feng drained it at a gulp. Amber and Sunset followed suit, and two more cupfuls went down in the same way. Meanwhile Patience had been scooping out some 'yolk'—the delicious golden crab-spawn—which she now offered to her mistress. Xi-feng told her to put lots of ginger and vinegar on it, then, having quickly disposed of it, 'You can all sit down now and get on with your party,' she said. 'I'm going.'

'What a nerve!' said Faithful. 'Scrounging off us like that!'

'You'd better be careful what you say to me, my girl,' said Xi-feng with a smile. 'I suppose you realize that Mr Lian has taken a fancy to you and is going to ask Her Old Ladyship if he can have you for his Number Two?'

Faithful tutted and shook her head. It was easy to see that she was blushing.

'Huh I' she said. 'Fancy a *lady* saying a thing like that! I'm going to wipe my smelly fingers on your face, Mrs Lian, if it's the last thing I do.'

'No, no! Please! Forgive me!' said Xi-feng, as Faithful stood up to carry Out her threat.

'Even *if she* does,' said Amber, laughing, 'I wouldn't be too sure that Patience will. Look at her, all of you! She hasn't eaten two crabs yet, but she's already finished a saucerful of vinegar!'

Patience, who had in her hand a crab richly endowed with 'yolk' that she had just finished shelling, held it up when she heard this jibe and advanced on Amber, intending to smear her face with it.

'You nasty, spiteful little creature!' she said, both laughing and indignant. 'I'll—'

But Amber dodged aside, and Patience, losing her balance, plastered the crab smack on to her mistress's cheek. xi-feng, at that moment still preoccupied with Faithful, was taken completely by surprise. Her startled 'Aiyo!' was too much for the maids, who collapsed in uncontrollable laughter. Xi-feng presently joined in, though cursing Patience as she did so.

'Stupid cow! Are you too drunk to see straight? All over my face!'

Patience hurriedly wiped it off and fetched water for her to wash with.

'Holy Name!' said Faithful. 'That was a judgement, if ever there was one!'

Hearing the laughter outside, Grandmother Jia eagerly asked to know its cause.

'What is it? What have you seen that's so funny? Tell us, so that we can share the joke.'

Faithful shouted back, amidst laughter.

'Mrs Lian came over here and stole some of our crab. Patience didn't like it, so she smeared crab-yolk all

over her mistress's face, and now the two of them are having a fight.'

Hoots of laughter from Grandmother Jia and Lady Wang.

Poor Mrs Lian!' said Grandmother Jia. 'You ought to feel sorry for her. Couldn't you spare her a few-of the legs or some of the underneath bits?'

There was renewed laughter from the maids. Faithful shouted back again.

'She can have all the crab's-legs on this table, and very welcome to them!'

Xi-feng, taking all in good part, finished washing her face and went back to help Grandmother Jia and the others at the centre table with their crabs.

Dai-yu dared not eat very much because of her delicate health, and after consuming a little of the claw-meat, excused herself from the table. Soon Grandmother Jia, too, had finished eating, and everyone washed their hands and broke off for a while to amuse themselves, some going off to admire the flowers, some to drop things in the water and watch the fish rise.

'It's rather windy for you here, Mother,' said Lady Wang, '—especially after you've just been eating crab. Perhaps you ought to go back to your own room now and test. If you have enjoyed it, we could come again tomorrow.'

'Yes, perhaps you are right,' said Grandmother Jia. 'I hadn't been going to leave, because I could see how much they were all enjoying themselves and was afraid of spoiling the fun. But perhaps you and I ought to be getting along now.'

As she rose to leave, she turned to address Xiang-yun.

'Don't let your Cousin Bao-yu eat too much I'

'No, Grandma.'

She turned once more as she was leaving, this time including Bao-chai in her admonition.

'And don't you two eat too much, either. Crab is very good to eat, but it isn't very good for you. If you eat too much of it, it will give you stomach-ache.'

'Yes, Grandma.'

The two girls saw her out of the Garden. When they were back again, they gave orders for the tables to be cleared and a new set of places to be laid; but Bao-yu objected.

'No, don't lay again,' he said. 'We want to get on with the poetry. Put the big round table in the middle with all the food and drink on it so that we can help ourselves when we feel like it and sit where we like. That will be much nicer than having set places.'

Bao-chai agreed; but Xiang-yun reminded them that there were others besides themselves to be considered, and having first ordered a separate table to be laid and some good hot crabs to be selected, she invited Aroma, Nightingale, Chess, Scribe, Picture, Oriole and Ebony to come and sit at it. After that she had a couple of carpets spread out on the ground beneath the cassia-trees at the foot of the rockery and made the old nannies and junior maids sit down on them and eat and drink to their hearts' content, insisting that they need only get up to wait on them if they were specially called for. Then she took the list of poem-titles and pinned it to the inside wall of the pavilion.

'Very original!' the others commented when they had finished reading the titles, but went on to express the fear that they might find them difficult to write on.

Xiang-yun explained what they had decided about rhymes: *viz.* that there should be no set rhyme-scheme and everyone should be free to choose their own.

'Now that's what I call sensible I' said Bao-yu. 'I can't stand set rhymes.'

Dai-yu had a barrel-shaped porcelain tabouret moved up to the verandah's edge, and having selected a fishing-rod for herself, sat leaning on the railing, fishing.

Bao-chai sat for some time silently contemplating a spray of cassia she had picked, then, leaning over the railings and idly plucking off the flowerets, dropped them one by one into the water and watched the fish swim up from below and nibble at them with plopping noises as they floated on the surface.

Xiang-yun for the most part sat quietly musing, occasionally getting up to look after Aroma and the other maids at the table outside, or to make sure that the people sitting on the carpets were getting enough to eat and drink.

Tan-chun stood with Li Wan and Xi-chun in the shade of a weeping willow, watching the water-fowl.

Ying-chun sat apart from the rest beneath a flowering tree, stringing jasmine blossoms into a flower-chain with a needle and thread.

Bao-yu watched Dai-yu fishing for a bit, then went over and leaned on the railings and talked with Bao-chai for a bit, and finally, after watching Aroma and the other maids eating and drinking at their table, ended up by drinking with them him-self while Aroma shelled a crab for him.

Presently Dai-yu put down her fishing-rod, went over to the central table, took up a silver 'self-service' wine-kettle whose surface was carved with a nielloed plum-flower pattern, and, having selected a little shallow, rose-quartz winecup, was just about to pour herself a drink, when a maid observed her and came hurrying up to do it for her.

'No, let me pour it myself,' said Dai-yu. 'That is half the fun. You get on with your party.'

So saying, she proceeded to half-fill the tiny receptacle with liquor from the silver kettle. But it proved to be **yellow** rice-wine, whereas what she wanted was spirits.

'I only ate a small amount of crab,' she said, 'but it has given me a slight heart-burn. What I really need is some very hot samshoo.'

'We have some,' said Bao-yu, and quickly ordered a kettle of special mimosa-flavoured samshoo to be heated for her. Dai-yu took only a sip of it before putting the winecup down again.

Presently Bao-chai strolled up and helped herself to the samshoo. She, too, put her cup down after taking only a tiny mouthful of it. Then she moistened a brush with ink, and going over to the list of titles, put a tick over the first one, 'Remembering the Chrysanthemums', and wrote the word 'Allspice' underneath it.

'Please leave Number Two for me, Chai,' said Bao-yu anxiously. 'I've already thought of four lines for it.'

Bao-chai laughed.

'I've had a hard enough job thinking of lines for this first one. You've nothing to worry about as far as I'm concerned.'

Dai-yu, without saying a word, quietly relieved Bao-chai of the brush, ticked first 'Questioning the Chrysanthemums' and then the eleventh title, 'The Dream of the Chrysanthemums', and wrote 'River' underneath each of them.

After her, Bao-yu took up the brush and ticked 'Seeking the Chrysanthemums,. He signed himself **'Green'**.

Tan-chun now drifted over and looked at the list.

'Oh, hasn't anyone chosen "Wearing the Chrysanthemums" yet?' she said. 'Let *me* do that one.'

She turned, smilingly, to Bao-yu and pointed a warning finger at him.

'We've just made a new rule, by the way. No naked ladies this time, please. You have been warned!'

Xiang-yun strolled up while she was saying this and ticked Numbers Four and Five— 'Admiring the Chrysanthemums' and 'Arranging the Chrysanthemums'—in rapid succession. She signed herself 'Xiang'

underneath them.

'You ought to have a pen-name like the test of us,' said Tan-chun.

'There are various pavilions and studios at home, of course,' said Xiang-yun, 'but I don't *live* in any of them. It would be rather pointless to call myself after a building like the rest of you.'

'What about that water pavilion "Above the Clouds" that Lady Jia was telling us about?' said Bao-chai. 'You could call *that* yours. Even if it doesn't exist any more, you can pretend that it *would* have been yours. You should call yourself "Cloud Maiden".'

'Yes, yes,' said the others; and before Xiang-yun herself could do anything, Bao-yu had crossed out the 'Xiang' and substituted the word 'Cloud' beneath it.

In less time than it would take to eat a meal, poems had been completed for each of the twelve titles. The young poets then wrote out their poems and handed them in to Ying-chun, who copied them out, each with the full pen-name of its author, on to the finest Snow Wave notepaper.

Li Wan then read them all through, the others overlooking her.

Remembering the Chrysanthemums

by Lady Allspice

The autumn wind that through the knotgrass blows
    Blurs the sad gazer's eye with unshed tears;
But autumn's guest, who last year graced this plot,
Only, as yet, in dreams of night appears.
    The wild geese from the North are now returning;
    The dhobi's thump at evening fills my ears.
Those golden flowers for which you see me pine
I'll meet once more at this year's Double Nine.

*

Seeking the Chrysanthemum

by **Green** Boy

The crisp day bids us go on an excursion—
Resistant to the wineshop door's temptation—
Some garden, where, before the frosts, was planted
The glory of autumn, being our destination:
Which after weary walk having found, we'll sing
    An autumn song with unsubdued elation.
    And you, gold flowers, if all the poet told
    You understood, would not refuse his gold!

*

Planting the Chrysanthemums

by **Green** Boy

Brought from their nursery and, with loving hands,
Planted along the fence and by the door—
A shower last night their wilting leaves revived,
Opening the morning-buds all silver-hoar.
Sweet flowers! a thousand autumn songs I'll sing
To praise your beauty, and libations pour,
And water you, and ridge with earth around.
No dust on *my* wet well-path shall be found!

*

Admiring the Chrysanthemums
by Cloud Maiden

Transplanted treasures, dear to me as gold—
Both the pale clumps and those of darker hue!
Rare-headed by your wintry bed I sit
And, musing, hug my knees and sing to you.
None more than you the villain world disdains;
None understands your proud heart as I do.
The precious hours of autumn I'll not waste,
But bide with you and savour their full taste.

*

Arranging the Chrysanthemums
by Cloud Maiden

What greater pleasure than the lute to strum
Or sip wine by your delicate display?
To hold the garden's fragrance in one vase,
And see all autumn in a single spray?
On frosty nights I'll dream you back again,
Brave in your garden bed at close of day.
Since with your shy disdain I sympathize,
'Tis you, not summer's gaudy blooms I prize.

*

Celebrating the Chrysanthemums
by River Queen

Down garden walks, in search of inspiration,
A restless demon drives me all the time;
Then brush blooms into praises, and the mouth

Grows scud-sweet, hymning those scents sublime.
Yet easier ’twere a world of grief to tell
Than to lock autumn’s secret in one rhyme.
That miracle old Tao did once attain;
Since when a thousand bards have tried in vain

*

Painting the Chrysanthemums
by Lady Allspice

The brush that praised them, eager for more tasks,
Would paint them now for painting’s no great cost
When cunning black-ink blots the flowers’ leaves make,
And white the petals, silvered o’er with frost.
Fresh scents of autumn from the paper rise,
And shapes unmoving by the wind are tossed.
No need at Double Ninth live flowers to pluck:
These living seem, upon a fine screen stuck!

*

Questioning the Chrysanthemums
by River Queen

Since none else autumn’s mystery can explain,
I come with murmured questions to your gate:
Who, world-disdainer, shares your hiding-place?
Of all the flowers why do yours bloom so late?
The garden silent lies in frosty dew;
The geese return; the cricket mourns his fate.
Let not speech from your silent world be banned:
Converse with me, since me you understand!

*

Wearing the Chrysanthemums
by Plantain Lover

Just to admire and not for our adornment
Were these reared and arranged with so much care;
Yet young Sir Fop, with whom flowers are a passion,
And drunk old Tao both dote on flowers to wear.
One’s head-cloth reeks of autumn’s acrid perfume;
Chill dew of autumn pearls the other’s hair

The vulgar crowd, which nothing understands,
Stops in the street and, jeering, claps its hands.

*

The Shadow of the Chrysanthemums
by Cloud Maiden

The autumn moonlight through the garden steals,
Filtered in patches variously bright.
Flowers by the house as silhouettes appear;
Flowers by the fence are flecked with coins of light.
In the flowers' wintry scent their souls reside,
Not in those frost-forms, than a dream more slight.
Even the gross vandal, squinting through drunken eyes,
Can, by their scents, the crushed flowers recognize.

*

The Dream of the Chrysanthemums
by River Queen

Light-headed in my autumn bed I lie
And seem to chase the moon across the sky.
Well, if immortal, I'll go seek old Tao,
Not imitate Zhuang's flittering butterfly!
Following the wild goose, into sleep I slid;
From which now, startled by the cricket's cry,
Midst cold and fog and dying leaves I wake,
With no one by to tell of my heart's ache.

*

The Death of the Chrysanthemums
by Plantain Lover

The feasting over and the first snow fallen,
The flowers frost-stricken lie or sideways lean,
Their perfume lingering, but their gold hue dimmed
And few poor, tattered leaves bereft of **green.**
Now under moonlit bench the cricket shrills,
And weary goose-files in the cold sky are seen.
Yet of your passing let me not complain:
Next autumn equinox we'll meet again!

*

Each poem was praised in turn, and the reading of the whole twelve concluded amidst cries of mutual admiration.

'Now just a moment!' said Li Wan, interrupting their encomiums. 'Let me first try to give you an impartial judgement. I think there were good lines in *all* of the poems, but comparing one with another, it seems to be that one is bound to place "Celebrating the Chrysanthemums" first, with "Questioning the Chrysanthemums" second and "The Dream of the Chrysanthemums" third. The titles themselves were original, and - particularly in their treatment of the subject these are three highly original poems. So I think that today the first place must undoubtedly go to River Queen. After those first three I would place "Wearing the Chrysanthemums", "Admiring the Chrysanthemums", "Arranging the Chrysanthemums", "Painting the Chrysanthemums" and "Remembering the Chrysanthemums" in that order.'

Bao-yu clapped his hands delightedly.

'Absolutely right! A very fair judgement!'

'I'm afraid mine *aren't* really all that good,' said Dai-yu. 'They are a bit too contrived.'

'There's nothing wrong with a bit of contrivance,' said Li Wan. 'One doesn't want the structure of a poem to stand out too ruggedly.'

'I very much like that couplet of Cloud Maiden's,' said Dai-yu:

> 'On frosty nights I'll dream you back again,
> Brave in your garden bed at close of day.

It's a technique that painters call "white-backing". That marvellous couplet that comes before it:

> To hold the garden's fragrance in a vase,
> And see all autumn in a single spray

already sums up all there is to be said on the subject of flower arrangement. You feel that she's left herself nothing else to say. So what does she do? She goes back to the time before the flowers were arranged—before they were picked, even. That *going back* in her "frosty nights' couplet is a very subtle way of throwing the main theme into relief, just as the artist's white-backing sharpens the highlights on the other side of the painting.'

Li Wan smiled.

'That may be so; but your own "acrid-sweet" couplet is more than a match for it.'

'I think Lady Allspice dealt with her subject most effectively,' said Tan-chun. 'That couplet of hers:

> But autumn's guest, who last year graced this plot,
> Only as yet in dreams of night appears

seems to bring out the idea of *remembering* so vividly.'

'Well, your "head-cloth reeking of autumn's acrid per-fume" and "chill dew of autumn pearling the hair" give a pretty vivid image of *wearing* chrysanthemums,' said Bao-chai with a laugh.

'And River Queen's "who shares your hiding place ?" "why do you bloom so late?",' said Xiang-yun, smiling mischievously, 'make so thorough a job of *questioning* them, that one feels the poor things must have

been quite tongue-tied!'

'For that matter,' said Li Wan, entering into the spirit of the thing, 'your persistent haunting of the chrysanthemums— "sitting bare-headed by their wintry bed" and "hugging your knees and singing to them"—makes one suspect that if the chrysanthemums *really* had consciousness, they might, in the end, have grown just a tiny bit tired of your company!'

The others all laughed.

'I seem to be bottom again,' said Bao-yu ruefully. 'Though I must say I should have thought that

> … to go on an excursion—
> Some garden where. . . was planted
> The glory of autumn being our destination

and so forth was a perfectly satisfactory exposition of "*seeking* the chrysanthemums"; and that

> A shower last night the wilting leaves revived,
> Opening the morning-buds all silver-hoar

dealt with the theme of *transplanting* chrysanthemums rather successfully. Heigh-ho! I suppose it's just that I couldn't produce anything quite as good as River Queen's "acrid-sweet" line, or Cloud Maiden's "bare-headed by your wintry bed", or Plaintain lover's "reeking head-cloth" or "few poor, tattered leaves", or Lady Allspice's "autumn guest in dreams of night appears".

'Well, never mind,' he went on, after a moment's reflection. 'Perhaps tomorrow or the day after, if I've got the time, I'll try to do all twelve of them again on my own.

'Your poems were perfectly all right,' said Li Wan consolingly. 'It's simply as you yourself have just said that they didn't have anything *quite* as good as the lines you have mentioned.'

Discussion of the poems continued a little longer, after which they called for another lot of hot crabs and sat down at the large round table to eat them.

'Eating crab-and admiring the cassia like this is itself a good theme for a poem, said Bao-yu. 'I've already thought of one. Is anyone else game to have a try ?'

He quickly washed his hands and taking up a brush, wrote down the poem he had thought of. The others then read what he had written:

> How delightful to sit and a crab's claw to chew
> In the cassia shade—with some ginger-sauce, too
> Old Grim-chops wants wine, though he's got no inside,
> And he walks never forwards, but all to one side.
> The 'yolks' are so tasty, who cares if we're ill!
> Though our fingers we've washed, they are crab-scented still.
> 'O crabs,' Dong-po said (and his words I repeat)
> 'You have not lived in vain if you're so good to eat!'

‘One could churn out *that* sort of poem by the dozen,’ said Dai-yu.

‘You’ve used up all your inspiration,’ said Bao-yu; ‘but instead of admitting that you can’t write any more, you make rude remarks about my poem!’

Dai-yu made no reply, but tilted her head back, lifted up her eyes, and for some minutes could be observed muttering softly to herself; then, picking a brush up, she wrote out the following poem rapidly and without hesitation:

In arms and in armour they met their sad fate.
How tempting they look now, piled up on a plate!
The white flesh is tasty, the **pink** flesh as well—
Both the white in the claws and the **pink** in the shell;
And we’re glad he’s an eight- not a four-legged beast
When there’s plenty of wine to enliven the feast.
So with crab let us honour the Double Ninth Day,
While chrysanthemums bloom ’neath the cassia’s spray.

Bao-yu had read this and was just beginning to say how good he thought it was when Dai-yu impetuously tore it up and told one of the servants to take away the pieces and burn them.

‘It’s not as good as yours,’ she said. ‘It deserves to be burnt, Actually yours is very good— better even than the chrysanthemum ones. You ought to keep it to show people.’

‘I’ve thought of one too,’ said Bao-chai. ‘It was rather a struggle, so I’m afraid it won’t be very good; but I’ll write it down anyway for a laugh.’

Then she wrote down *her* poem, and the others read it.

With winecups in hand, as the autumn day ends,
And with watering mouths, we await our small friends.
A straightforward breed you are certainly not,
And the goodness inside you has all gone to pot—

There were cries of admiration at this point.

‘That’s a very neat bit of invective 1’ said Bao-yu. ‘I can see I shall have to burn *my* poem now!’

They read on.

For your cold humours, ginger; to cut out your smell
We’ve got wine and chrysanthemum petals as well.
As you hiss in your pot, crabs, d’ye look back with pain
On that calm moonlit cove and the fields of fat grain?

When they had finished reading, all agreed that this was the definitive poem on the subject of eating crabs.

‘It’s the sign of a real talent,’ they said, ‘to be able to see a deeper, allegorical meaning in a frivolous subject—though the social satire *is* a trifle on the harsh side!’

Just then Patience arrived back in the Garden.

But what then ensued will be told in the following chapter.

CHAPTER 39

An inventive old county woman tells a story of somewhat questionable veracity
And an impressionable young listener insists on getting to the bottom of the matter

PATIENCE, you will recall, had just returned to the party.

'What's happened to your mistress?' the others asked her.

'Why doesn't she come back and join us?'

'She hasn't got time,' said Patience, laughing. 'She's sent me to ask if you've got any crabs left. She says she didn't get a proper chance to eat any earlier on, and as she hasn't got time to come here herself, would I ask you, if you've still got any, to let me take a few back for her.'

'We've got plenty left,' said Xiang-yun, and gave orders for ten of the largest to be put in a box for her to take.

'Pick as many as you can with the round 'navels',' said Patience to the old servant who was departing to do Xiang-yun's bidding.

Li Wan tried to make Patience sit down with them, but she refused.

'You *shall* sit down!' said Li Wan, eyeing her skittishly; and taking her by the hand, she drew her down beside her and held a cup of wine up to her lips so that she was forced to drink. Patience gulped down a mouthful of it and then rose again to go.

'I won't *let* you go!' said Li Wan. 'The only person you ever take any notice of is that precious Feng of yours; you think you don't need to obey me; but you shall.' She turned to the old woman, now waiting in readiness with the box of crabs, and told her to go on ahead with them and tell Xi-feng that Patience was being detained. The old woman went away.

She returned a short while after, still carrying the box, with a message.

'Mrs Lian says thank you very much, and she hopes you didn't think her greedy for asking. She's put some caltrop-cakes and some chicken-fat rolls in the box, that have just been sent her by the elder Lady Wang. She thought you and the young ladies might like to try them.'

There was a further message for Patience:

'Mrs Lian says she thought she sent you to fetch something for her, not to stay here and amuse yourself. Anyway, she says, tell her not to drink too much.'

'Oh,' said Patience, laughing, 'and what will happen to me if I do?'

As if in defiance of her mistress's instructions, she fell to eating and drinking with great gusto. Li Wan meanwhile encircled her waist in an affectionate embrace.

'What a pity that so distinguished-looking a young woman should have been born to so humble a fate!' said Li Wan. 'It's *you* who should have been the mistress. You would have made such a good lady. No one who didn't know would ever take you for a maid.'

Patience, who had continued eating and drinking with Bao-chai and Xiang-yun while Li Wan was saying this, now turned round and looked at her with a giggle.

'Stop it, Mrs Zhu! You're tickling me!'

'Aiyo I' said Li Wan. 'What's this great hard thing here?'

'Keys,' said Patience.

'Keys ?' said Li Wan. 'What has your mistress got so precious that you need to carry keys round all the time? Do you know what I tell people about you? I tell them: Just as you can't imagine a Tripitaka going off to India to fetch the scriptures without his white horse or a Liu Zhi-yuan conquering the Empire without a Spirit of the Melon Fields to give him his armour, so you can't imagine a Wang Xi-feng without a Patience alongside helping her. *You* are your mistress's master-key. What does she need to make you carry these things around with you for?'

Patience laughed embarrassedly.

'You are making fun of me, Mrs Zhu. I'm afraid you've had too much to drink.'

'No ,it's true,' said Bao-chai. 'Whenever we start gossiping about personalities, we nearly always end up by agreeing what exceptional people you and the other chief maids are. And all exceptional in your own different ways, too— that's what's so interesting.'

'It's almost as though Nature had in each case designed the mistress and the maid to suit each other,' said Li Wan. 'Take Grandmother and Faithful, for example. Grandmother would be completely lost without Faithful. Who in the family from Lady Wang downwards would ever dare answer Grandmother back? Yet Faithful does. And what's more, Grandmother will listen to her. And look at all the things that Grandmother has. No one else could ever remember them the way that Faithful can. Just think how Grandmother would be plundered and cheated if Faithful weren't there to look after them. And on top of it all, she's a very fair person. She'll often put in a good word for someone. And though she has so much influence with Grandmother, she never, never uses it to do anyone else down.'

Xi-chun smiled.

'Yesterday when Grannie was talking about Faithful she said, "She's better than all you grandchildren!"'

'Faithful's a good sort,' said Patience. 'I don't consider myself in her class at all.'

'Mother's Suncloud is a good, honest soul,' said Bao-yu.

'She certainly is,' said Tan-chun. 'She's got a mind of her own, though. You know what a Holy Buddha Mother is: she doesn't notice a half of what goes on around her. But Sun-cloud does. And *she* is the one who always has to remind Mother about everything. She even knows about outside matters. When Father is at home, it's Suncloud who has to remind Mother about them when she forgets.'

'I don't know about Mother and Suncloud,' said Li Wan, 'but what about this young gentleman here?' She pointed to Bao-yu. 'Can you imagine the sort of state *he* would be in if he hadn't got his Aroma to look after him? And Feng too. Even though she's a regular Tyrant King, she still needs her Patience in order to be so efficient, just as much as the real Tyrant King needed his two strong arms in order to be able to lift up those hundredweight tripods.'

'There were four of us when I first came here with Mrs Lian,' said Patience, 'but the others all either died or left. I'm the only one who's stayed with her all along.'

'You're lucky then,' said Li Wan. 'And Feng is lucky, too. When *I* first came here to Mr Zhu, *I* had several maids, too, but—I don't know why it was, for I'm sure you wouldn't call me a hard mistress—they were always dissatisfied. So when Mr Zhu died, I took advantage of their being still young to get rid of them all. If only I'd

had a dependable girl like you that I could have kept on with me, I shouldn't feel quite so helpless now.'

Her eyes began to redden as she said this, and she seemed about to cry.

'Oh, come now!' said the others. 'There's no need to upset yourself. If you're going to be like this, we might just as well break up the party.'

They did in fact begin washing their hands then and presently decided to go off in a body to pay their duty calls on Grandmother Jia and Lady Wang. Meanwhile the old women and maids busied themselves with sweeping out the pavilion and stacking and washing up the cups and dishes.

Aroma left in the company of Patience. On the way back she asked Patience into **Green** Delights. She made her sit down and invited her to take tea, but Patience declined, saying that she would drop in another time, and rose to go. Aroma had something to ask her, however, and called after her as she was going.

'What's happened to this month's allowances ?' she said. 'Even Her Old Ladyship's and Her Ladyship's people haven't had theirs yet.'

Patience spun round when she heard this and came back again.

'Don't ask me about that, please!' she said in a low, agitated voice, after first glancing round to make sure that no one else was present. 'Whatever it is, you'll only have another day or two to wait, I promise you.'

Aroma was amused to see her so agitated.

'Why, what's the matter? Why should you be in such a state about it?'

Patience dropped her voice even lower.

'Mrs Lian has already put the money for this month's allowances out at interest. She's waiting for the interest on some of her other loans to pay your allowances with. It's all right for me to tell you this, but whatever you do, don't let anyone else know about it!'

Aroma laughed.

'But she's not short of money, she's got plenty. What does she want to go giving herself all this extra worry for?'

'She's certainly not short of money,' said Patience. 'Just in the few years since she started doing this, the amount she has got out on loan must have grown to several hundred times the original premium. And she doesn't spend all of her own allowance) either. Whenever she's got nine or ten taels saved up out of it, she invests them too. Why, just her profits alone after she's deducted the allowances from the interest must be in the region of a thousand taels a year.'

'You and your mistress are a nice pair, I must say!' said Aroma. Keeping the rest of us short while you use our money to feather your own nests with!'

'That's most unfair!' said Patience indignantly. 'Any way, I'm sure you can't really be short of money.'

'Not myself, it's true' said Aroma. 'In any case, I haven't got anything to spend it on. I was thinking more of my young gentleman. I like to keep some by me in case *he* ever needs any.'

'Look, if you're in urgent need of money, I've got a few taels put by myself that I can let you have,' said Patience. 'You can have them as an advance on this month's allowance, if you like.'

'I don't really need any at the moment,' said Aroma, 'but may I take you up on your offer if I ever do?'

'Of course,' said Patience, and left without further ceremony.

Outside the courtyard gate a maid from xi-feng was looking for her.

'The Mistress wants to see you about something.'

'What has she got so urgent that she has to keep pestering me like this?' said Patience. 'I've just had Mrs Zhu all over me to make me stay and talk to *her*. It's not as if I'd run away.'

‘Better ask her yourself,’ said the girl. ‘It wasn’t *my* idea to fetch you.’

‘Cheeky devil!’ said Patience, and continued on her way.

When she got there, however, it was not Xi-feng she found waiting for her, but the old countrywoman she had admitted on a previous occasion as a suppliant, Grannie Liu, with her little grandson Ban-er. They were sitting in the side room on the kang with Zhang Cai’s wife and Zhou Rui’s wife on either side of them, while maids were emptying sacks of jujubes, melons and other farm produce on the floor below. The company rose hurriedly to their feet as Patience entered. Grannie Liu, who recognized her from her last visit, scrambled down from the kang and greeted her at once as ‘Miss Patience’ without any of the previous time’s confusion.

‘The family all send their regards, Miss. They’d have come themselves long since to see you and pay their respects to their Aunt Lian, only they’ve been too busy with the farm-work. Anyways, they’ve had a good harvest this year, thanks be, and it’s been a good year for the fruit and vegetables. This here that I’ve brought is the first pickings. We didn’t like to sell them, because we wanted our first-fruits to go to Mrs Lian and the young ladies. We thought that mayhap eating the rarities of earth and sea every day of their lives they might sometimes tire of delicate food and fancy a bit of plain country stuff for a change. Anyway, there you are! It’s a poor gift, but it’s given with a warm heart!’

‘It’s very good of you to have brought it,’ said Patience, and begged her to be seated, sitting down herself as she did so. She invited Zhou Rui’s wife and Zhang Cai’s wife to be seated as well, and ordered one of the junior maids to pour tea.

Mesdames Zhou and Zhang chaffed her on her appearance.

‘You’ve got the spring in your face, Miss. Your eyes are all **red.**’

Patience laughed.

‘I know. I don’t drink normally, but today Mrs Zhou and the young ladies got hold of me and just forced it down me. I was *made* to drink, against my will. That’s why my face is so **red.**’

‘Well *I* don’t know,’ said Zhang Cai’s wife. ‘Here’s me just dying for a drink, but nobody offers me one. Next time anyone invites you, Miss, you must take me with you.’

The others laughed.

‘I saw those crabs this morning,’ said Zhou Rui’s wife. ‘Great big things. There couldn’t have been more than two or three to a catty. And I should think altogether there must have been seventy or eighty catties in those hampers. Even so,’ she said reflectively, ‘there probably wouldn’t have been enough for all the staff to have some.’

‘Lots of them didn’t,’ said Patience. ‘It was only the top ones that got one or two crabs to themselves. The rest of them only got a taste - some of them not even that.’

‘Good crabs like that are selling at a pennyweight a catty this year,’ said Grannie Liu. ‘If one catty is a pennyweight, fifty catties is two taels ten, and another thirty is one and ten; ten and two is twelve and twice ten is a tael, that’s thirteen, and then there’s the wine and the other dishes. It couldn’t have cost less than twenty taels in all. Bless us and save us that’d keep a farmer and his family for a year I’

‘I take it you’ve already seen Mrs Lian,’ said Patience.

‘Yes,’ said Grannie Lu. ‘She told us to wait.’

She glanced through the open window as she said this and noticed that the day was drawing on towards evening.

‘It’s getting dark earlier these days,’ she said. ‘We’d better be on our way. We don’t want to find the city gates shut, or we shall be in a proper pickle.’

‘Just wait while I slip over and find out what the Mistress is up to,’ said Zhou Rui’s wife. She left the room and was gone for some considerable time. When she eventually returned, she was full of smiles.

‘It’s Grannie’s lucky day,’ she said. ‘She’s struck lucky with both of them.’

‘How do you mean ?’ said Patience.

‘Well,’ said Zhou Rui’s wife, ‘Mrs Lian was with Her Old Ladyship when I got there, so I went up to her and told her on the side that Grannie wanted to go now to make sure of getting to the gates in time. “Oh” she said, “she came such a long way with all that stuff. If it’s getting late, she’d better spend the night here and leave tomorrow morning.” Well, that was one piece of luck; but that’s nothing to what followed, because Her Old Ladyship had overheard this and asked her who this “Grannie Liu” was, and when Mrs Lian told her, she said, “Oh, I’ve been just longing for someone with a bit of age and experience to talk to! Bring her here! Introduce her to me!” Now that really *was* a stroke of luck!’

She urged Grannie Liu to leave her place on the kang and go over to the other apartment; but the old countrywoman was seized with a sudden attack of shyness.

‘Look at me! Dear soul, I’m in no fit state to see her now! Tell her I’ve already left!’

‘Go on, you go and see her!’ said Patience. ‘It’ll be all right. Our old lady is always very nice to poor or elderly people She’s not the least bit pretentious or stuck-up like some I could mention. If you’re nervous about meeting high-ups, Mrs Zhou and I will go with you to give you confidence.’

She proceeded, with Mrs Zhou’s assistance, to conduct the old woman to her interview.

When they saw Patience coming out of the courtyard, the pages on duty at the gate stood up, and two of them came running up to her.

‘Miss! Miss!’

‘What’s it this time?’ said Patience.

‘I’ve been waiting to catch you for hours, Miss,’ said the first of the boys. ‘My ma’s took ill and I’ve got to go and fetch the doctor for her. Will it be all right if I take the night

off?’

‘You’re a nice lot!’ said Patience. ‘It’s my belief that you’ve got it all worked out between you so that one of you gets a holiday every day. And instead of telling the Mistress proper-1 y, as you’re supposed to do, you come round to me with these sad stories and make *me* take the responsibility. When Stoppo did this the other day, the Master called for him while he was still away and *I* got into trouble by speaking jip for him. The Master accused me of doing favours. And now you want to do the same thing.’

‘His ma really is ill, Miss,’ said Zhou Rui’s wife. ‘I’m sure it would be in order for you to let him go.’

‘All right, then. But mind you’re back first thing tomorrow,’ Patience told the boy. ‘Now you heard that, didn’t you? First thing. Because I’ve got work for you to do. No lying in bed until you can feel the sun on your backside I And I want you to take a message to Brightie for me on the way. Tell him the Mistress says that if he hasn’t handed in the test of that interest by tomorrow, she won’t ask him for it again, because she’ll know that he’s keeping it for himself.’

The boy promised to deliver the message and scampered off, delighted to be released.

By the time Patience and her charges arrived at Grandmother Jia’s apartment, all the young denizens of Prospect Garden had for some time been assembled there in attendance, so that as Grannie Liu entered the room, she was confronted by a bevy of unfamiliar young ladies, all resplendent in ornaments of pearl and kingfisher, like a bed of beautiful flowers, none of which she could give a name to. In their midst a venerable old lady reclined on a couch. A young woman, pretty as a picture and dressed in silk and satin from top to toe, sat behind

her, gently pounding her legs. Xi-feng, the only person there she could recognize, was standing to one side of her, evidently in the midst of telling her something amusing. Deducing that the old lady on the couch must be Grandmother Jia, Grannie Liu hurried up to her and made her an antique curtsey.

'Your servant, my lady!'

Grandmother Jia inclined herself politely from the couch and asked Zhou Rui's wife to bring up a chair for her to sit on. Ban-er, bashful as ever, would not attempt a greeting.

'Now, old kinswoman,' said Grandmother Jia, 'and what would your age be?'

Seventy-five this year,' said Grannie Liu.

Grandmother Jia turned round to the others present.

'That's several years older than me. Fancy still being so fit and lively Heaven only knows what *I* shall be like at that age!'

Grannie Liu laughed.

'I was born for a hard life, d'ye see, just as Your Ladyship was born for a soft one. We couldn't all be like Your Lady-ship, or there'd be no one to do the farming.'

'Are your eyes and teeth still good?' Grandmother Jia asked her.

'All bar a back tooth on the left-hand side that's getting a bit loose this year.'

'There! and I'm already a useless old woman,' said Grand-mother Jia. 'Poor eyesight, poor hearing, memory going—I can't even remember the names of old kinsfolk like yourself any longer. I'm scared to meet them when they come visiting, for fear they might laugh at me. There's not much I can do nowadays except eat—what I can get my teeth into—and sleep. Apart from that, I share a joke or two with these young people when I need a bit of diversion, and that's about all.'

'Your Ladyship is lucky,' said Grannie Liu. '*I* couldn't have such a life if I wanted it.'

'Lucky? No!' said Grandmother Jia. 'I'm just an old crock!'

The others all laughed.

'Our Feng has been telling me that you've brought a lot of fruit and vegetables with you,' said Grandmother Jia. 'I've asked the servants to bring them over. I'm so looking forward to some nice, fresh farm vegetables. The stuff we buy outside isn't as tasty as your home-grown stuff, you know.'

'That's the countryman's idea of a treat,' said Grannie Liu. 'He can't afford meat and fish, so when he fancies a little luxury, he likes to eat his food fresh from the ground.'

'Now that you're one of the family,' said Grandmother Jia, 'I hope you will stay long enough to enjoy your visit. Don't go hurrying back again. Stay here a couple of days or so, if you can put up with us. We've got a garden too, you know, and we grow a certain amount of fruit in it. Tomorrow you must try some of *our* stuff- and you must take some back home with you when you go. It will seem more like a proper visit to relations if you stay a bit, instead of popping in and popping straight out again.'

Xi-feng could see that Grandmother Jia took pleasure in the old woman's company and added her own persuasion.

'It's probably not as roomy here as your farmyard, but I expect we'll manage to tuck you in somewhere. And you'll be able to tell our old lady all the village gossip.'

'Feng!' said Grandmother Jia, laughing in spite of herself. 'Don't make fun! She's a simple countrywoman. You can't expect her to stand up to your teasing in the way that we can.'

She gave orders for Ban-er to be given some sweetmeats. He was unwilling to eat in front of so many people, however, so she told them to give him some money instead, and to get some of the younger pages to take

him outside to play.

After Grannie Liu had taken tea, she regaled Grandmother Jia with some anecdotes of village life, thus further endearing herself to her new acquaintance. She was still holding forth when Xi-feng, who had slipped Out some time previously, sent someone round to invite her back for dinner. Grand-mother Jia selected some food from her own dishes and sent them to Xi-feng's place for Grannie Liu to try in addition to what Xi-feng was giving her.

Xi-feng could see that Grandmother Jia had taken a fancy to the old woman, so after dinner she sent her back to Grand-mother Jia's apartment. As soon as she arrived, Faithful ordered some of the older domestics to conduct her to a bath. She herself went off to fetch her a change of clothes. She selected two fairly modest items from her own wardrobe and sent them to the bathroom with instructions that Grannie Liu should change into them after her bath. Such goings-on were outside even the old grannie's extensive experience, but she took them all in good part, and having submitted to the ordeal of the bath, quickly dressed herself in the proffered clothes and went in to take her place once more beside the couch and resume her role of *raconteuse.* In this she was eminently successful, since Bao-yu and the girls, now seated on all sides around her, found her simple country talk much more fascinating than any of the fictions told by the blind ballad-singers who sometimes visited the house.

Indeed, there was more than an element of fiction in what she told them: for Grannie Liu, though born and bred in the country, was a shrewd old soul to whom the years had given a pretty good understanding of human weakness, and when she sensed the old lady's pleased excitement and the avid attention of her younger listeners, she did her best not to disappoint them by supplying from her own invention whatever memory and experience were inadequate to provide.

'We country-folk working out there on the land—year in, year Out, rain or fine, spring, summer, autumn and winter—we never get any time off,' she told them. 'If we rest, it's only as you might say 'napping in harness', like the old post-horse in the story. And many a strange happening do we see, out there on the land.

'Take what happened last winter, for instance. It had been snowing for several days without a stop and the snow was two or three feet thick on the ground, and this particular morning I rose up early, and while I was still indoors, I heard the sound of something stirring outside in the woodpile. I thought to myself, 'That'll be someone stealing the firewood.' So I put my eye to the hole in the shutter, and sure enough there was someone there; but it wasn't anyone from the village.'

'It was probably some traveller,' Grandmother Jia interrupted. 'He was feeling cold and helped himself to a bit to make a fire with, so that he could get warm.'

'Ah, but it *wasn't* a traveller,' said Grannie Liu. 'That was the strange thing about it. Now who do you think it was, my old soul? 'Twas a young woman, seventeen or eighteen years of age seemingly, pretty as a picture, and with no more on her but a **red** dress and a white satin skirt, and the hair on her bare head combed as sleek and shining as black lacquer paint—'

At that point her story was interrupted by a confused hubbub of voices outside. One of them could be heard above the rest saying, 'It isn't serious. There's no point in frightening Her Old Ladyship.'

'What is it?' the old lady asked in some alarm.

'A fire has broken out in the South Court stables,' said one of the maids. 'It isn't serious, though. They've already got it under control.'

Always the most timorous of mortals where fire was concerned, Grandmother Jia struggled to her feet, and supported by the maids, led the others out onto the loggia to see what was happening. Somewhere beyond the

south-east corner of the courtyard the glare of flames was still distinctly visible. Terrified Out of her wits, she began calling on the names of the Buddha, and hurriedly Sent someone to burn incense before the image of the Fire God.

By now Lady Wang had arrived with the younger women, and added her voice to the others' in assuring the old lady that the fire was well under control and urging her to go indoors; but Grandmother Jia insisted on staying outside until the last of the flames had been extinguished.

As soon as they were all inside again, Bao-yu began questioning Grannie Liu about her interrupted story.

'Why was the girl out in all that snow stealing firewood?' he asked her. 'She might have caught her death of cold.'

'For goodness' sake don't ask about *that!'* said Grand-mother Jia. 'It was talking about firewood that started that fire just now. Think of something else to talk about for good-ness' sake!'

Though privately far from satisfied, Bao-yu was obliged to let the matter rest while Grannie turned her inventive faculties in another direction.

'In a farmstead east of ours there was an old dame of more than ninety who had fasted and prayed to the Buddha every day of her life. At last the Blessed Guanyin was moved by her prayers and appeared to her one night in a dream. 'It was to have been your fate to be cut off without an heir,' the Blessed Mother told her, 'but because of your great piety, I have petitioned the Jade Emperor to give you a grandson.'

'Now this old dame had an only son, and the son, too, had an only son who in spite of all their care had died when he was only seventeen or eighteen, to their sore and bitter grief. But after she had this dream a second grandson was born. He'd be thirteen or fourteen now—a very handsome lad, with skin as white as snow, and that sharp and clever you'd hardly credit it. So you see there are gods and Buddhas watching over us, whatever folk may say!'

The circumstances of this tale so perfectly accorded with the idea they had privately formed of their own situation, that both the senior ladies in her audience—Lady Wang no less than Grandmother Jia—were quite captivated by it. But Bao-yu, whose thoughts were still on the beautiful pilferer of firewood, looked glum and preoccupied. His sister Tan-chun observed this and sought to distract him.

'We've got to make some sort of return for Cousin Shi's party, Bao. Why don't we go back now and discuss when the next poetry meeting is to be? We can have our party for Cousin Shi at the same time, and Grandma will be able to come and look at the chrysanthemums.'

'Grandma's already promised to give a return party for Cousin Shi herself,' said Bao-yu, 'and we are all invited. We'd better wait until that's over before putting on anything of our own.'

'The longer we delay, the colder the weather will be,' said Tan-chun. 'It won't be much fun for Grandma if it's too cold.'

'But she loves parties when it's raining or snowing,' said Bao-yu. 'Why don't we wait until the first snowfall and have it then? Call it a snow-viewing party. Think how romantic:

chanting poems in the falling snow!'

'It would be more romantic still,' said Dai-yu drily, 'if instead of chanting poems we had a big bundle of firewood and took it in turns to tiptoe through the snow and pull out sticks from it.'

Bao-chai and the other girls all laughed, but Bao-yu stared at Dai-yu rather crossly and said nothing.

After the company had dispersed, Bao-yu finally managed to get Grannie Liu into a corner and question her in detail about the mysterious snow maiden. Grannie Liu's inventiveness was once more put to the test.

'On the embankment that runs along the north side of our land,' she said, 'there is a little shrine. The image

inside it is not a god or a Buddha, though. There used at one time to be a gentleman living in our parts—'

She broke off at this point and appeared to be trying to remember a name.

'Never mind his name,' said Bao-yu. 'Don't try to remember it. Just tell me what happened.'

'This gentleman had no son, but he had an only daughter called—I think it was Ruo-yu. She could read books as well as any scholar, this Ruo-yu, and the gentleman loved her more than all the treasure in the world. But sad to say, she took sick and died when she was only seventeen years old—

'Bao-yu groaned and stamped his foot.

'So what happened then?'

'Because the gentleman loved her so dearly, he had this shrine built for her out in the fields and had a likeness of her made out of wood and clay to put inside it; and he arranged for someone to burn incense there and always keep a spark of fire going inside the burner. But as the years went by, both the gentleman and the people who used to tend the shrine for him all died, and now the shrine is falling into ruin and the statue has come to life and started haunting people.'

'No, no,' Bao-yu interrupted hurriedly, 'that wouldn't be the statue coming to life. People like that are never really dead, even after they have died.'

'Holy Name!' said Grannie Liu. 'Fancy that now! And me thinking all along it was the statue. Well, whatever it is, every so often it takes on human shape and goes wandering abroad troubling people. And that's what I saw when I looked out that time and saw someone taking our firewood. The people in our village are talking of breaking up the image and knocking the shrine down so as to put a stop to the haunting.'

'Good gracious! they mustn't do that!' said Bao-yu. 'That's a terrible sin, knocking a temple down!'

'Now I am glad you told me that,' said Grannie Liu gravely. 'When I get hack, I shall do my best to stop them.'

'My grandmother and Lady Wang and in fact just about everyone in this family is terribly keen on good works,' said Bao-yu. 'There's nothing they like better than repairing temples and restoring things. Tomorrow I'll write out an appeal and collect some subscriptions for you. *You* can be the fund's Treasurer, and when we've got enough money together, you can supervise the restoration, And I'll get them to send you some money every month for incense, How would that be?'

'Statue or spirit or whatever she is,' said Grannie Liu, 'I shall certainly be grateful to her for the money.'

Bao-yu pressed her for the names of the nearest farms and villages and the exact location of the shrine in relation to them as well as the distance to it and the general direction in which it lay. Answering all these questions with whatever came first into her head, Grannie Liu supplied a set of fictitious directions which Bao-yu, believing them to be genuine, carefully committed to memory and carried back to his room, where he lay awake half the night planning what he would do for the beautiful wood-thief in the days ahead.

He went out of the Garden first thing next morning, and handing Tealeaf a few hundred cash, told him the directions for getting to the shrine as given him by Grannie Liu the night before, and instructed him to follow them, inspect the shrine, and report back on what he saw. He would await Tea-leaf's report before deciding what to do next.

But once Tealeaf had gone he found the waiting very tedious, and as the day wore on and Tealeaf still failed to return, he became as fidgety as a worm on hot earth. He was obliged to wait until sundown before Tealeaf finally came back. When he did, however, he was looking extremely pleased with himself.

'You managed to find it then?' Bao-yu asked him eagerly. 'Yes,' said Tealeaf, smiling broadly, 'but you couldn't have heard the directions right. I had a terrible job finding it. The place where it is and the way to it are

nothing like you said. That's why I took so long. I was all day looking for it. In the end I found that there *is* a ruined temple in that area, but it's not where you said: it's at the east *end* of the north embankment, on a corner.'

Bao-yu's face beamed with pleasure.

'Grannie Liu's a very old woman,' he said. 'It's quite possible that she misremembered when she gave me those directions. Anyway, tell me what you saw.'

'The temple was south-facing, like you said,' Tealeaf replied, *'and* it was in a very tumble-down condition. I'd been searching neatly all day by then, so of course when I saw *that,* I was very relieved and hurried straight inside. But oh lot! when I looked at the image, I was so scared I hurried straight out again it was so *real!'*

Bao-yu laughed delightedly.

'Of course. If she's capable of coming to life, you'd expect a certain liveliness in the Statue.'

'She?' said Tealeaf. 'This was no she. It was an ugly great Plague God with a **blue** face and **red** hair!'

'Useless dolt!' said Bao-yu angrily. 'You can't even do a simple little errand like this for me.'

'That's most unfair,' said Tealeaf in a deeply aggrieved tone of voice. 'You send me off on a wild-goose chase to look for something you've read about in some book or other or heard about in some old-wives' tale, and then when I can't find it (because there's probably no such thing any way) you start abusing me.'

Bao-yu saw that he had hurt his feelings, and hastened to comfort him.

'There, there, don't be upset! Some time when you're not too busy you shall have another look for it. If the old woman is deceiving us, you naturally won't be able to find it. But if there really is such a place and you do, then you will have a share in the merit when it's restored. And of course, I shall give you a very big reward.'

While he was talking to Tealeaf, one of the pages from the inner gate came up and said that 'one of the young ladies from Her Old Ladyship's room' was at the gate asking for Master Bao.

Who it was and what she wanted will be revealed in the following chapter.

CHAPTER 40

Lady Jia holds two feasts in one day in the Prospect Garden
And Faithful makes four calls on three dominoes in the
Painted Chamber

HEARING that he was wanted, Bao-yu hurried to the gate of the inner mansion. Amber was standing L fl front of the screen-wall waiting for him.

'Hurry! You're holding everyone up. There's something they want to talk to you about,' she said.

In fact, when he arrived at his grandmother's room, she and his mother and the girls were already discussing it 'it' being the question of what arrangements they should make for the return party for Shi Xiang-yun.

'I'll tell you what to do,' said Bao-yu. 'Since there won't be any outsiders at this party, instead of having a fixed menu and formally4aid tables, why not get them to do one or two of everyone's favourite dishes, put them in those lacquer food-boxes that have different compartments for the different dishes, and serve them on little individual tables with a "self-service" wine-kettle each, so that everyone can pour their own wine? I'm sure that would be jollier than a formal party.'

Grandmother Jia was much taken with this proposal and at once sent orders to the kitchen to do as he had suggested.

‘Tell them that tomorrow we want them to choose some of the things they know we like and put them in boxes - one box for each of us. And tell them that we shall want *lunch* served in the Garden tomorrow as well.’

The lamps had by now been lit. Of the night which followed out record gives no account.

Rising early next morning, they were delighted to observe that it was going to be a beautiful clear, autumn day. Li Wan was among the earliest up, and at once began to supervise the older women and maids in sweeping up fallen leaves, polishing chairs and tables, and getting ready the sets of teacups, winecups and so forth that would be needed for the party. Xi-feng’s maid Felicity, accompanied by Grannie Lin and little Ban-er, arrived while they were in the midst of this activity.

‘You are very busy, Mrs Zhu,’ said Grannie Liu.

Li Wan smiled.

‘I *told* you you’d never get away I You kept saying yesterday that you had to go, but I knew they wouldn’t let you.’

‘It was Her Old Ladyship that kept me,’ said Grannie Liu. ‘She said she wanted me to enjoy meself for a day or two before I went back.’

Felicity produced several large keys.

‘Mrs Lian says the little tables already in use may not he enough and we’d better open the upstairs storeroom and get some more out, just for today. She meant to come over her8elf and see to it, but she’s with Her Ladyship at the moment and can t get away, so she says would you mind Opening the storeroom for her and getting some of the servants to carry them down?’

Li Wan sent Candida to the storeroom with the keys and told one of the old women to go to the inner gate and get Some of the pages on duty there to help with the carrying. She herself went and stood in the courtyard behind Prospect Hall and watched from below while the Painted Chamber was opened up and the tables were one by one carried down from it. The team of maids, pages and old nannies worked together with such enthusiasm that soon more than twenty of the little tables had been manhandled. downstairs into the courtyard.

‘Gently now, gently!’ said Li Wan as they were moving them. ‘No need to go at it as if all the devils in hell were after you! You’ll chip the edges off them if you’re not careful.’

She turned to Grannie Liu.

‘Wouldn’t you like to go up and have a look?’

The old woman needed no second asking. Holding Ban-er tightly by the hand, she scrambled up the stairway and looked inside. The interior was stacked high with folding screens, tables, chairs, lanterns and furniture of every kind. Much of what she saw she could not identify, but the dull gleam of gold, the rich glow of coloured lacquers, and the artistry and sumptuousness of the objects drew many a pious ejaculation from her before she descended. The door of the storeroom was then locked and the remaining maids came down.

‘I wonder how energetic Lady Jia will be feeling today,’ said Li Wan. ‘Perhaps while you are about it you had better get out the oars and punt-poles and paddles and some boat-awnings as well, in case she decides to go on the water.’

‘Yes’m,’ said the maids, and proceeded to unlock the storeroom again and carry down the items specified. Li Wan meanwhile sent one of the pages to tell the boatwomen that they were to pole a couple of punts out from the boathouse and have them by in readiness.

While this activity was still in progress, Grandmother Jia arrived at the head of a troupe of females. Li Wan hurried forward to greet her.

‘You are very energetic this morning, Grandmother; I didn’t expect you in the Garden so soon. I was hoping that you would still be doing your hair. I’ve picked some chrysanthemums for you to wear and I was just about to send them round to you.’

Even as she was saying this, Casta arrived carrying a large dish of peacock-**green** glaze shaped like a lotus4eaf, in which chrysanthemum-flowers of many different colours were being kept in moisture. Grandmother Jia chose a dark **red** one to fasten in the side of her hair. As she turned her head to do so, she caught sight of Grannie Liu and smiled at her in welcome.

‘Come over here! You must have one too!’

Before she had finished, Xi-feng had already seized the old woman by the hand and was dragging her over.

‘Come on, let me dress you up properly!’

She began sticking the chrysanthemums into her hair, putting them in at every angle, and continued until all the flowers in the dish had been used up. The effect was so ludicrous that Grandmother Jia and the rest all burst out laughing. Grannie Liu, not a whit perturbed, good-humouredly joined in the laughter.

‘I don’t know what my poor old head can have done to deserve so much honour,’ she said.

‘You ought to pull them out and throw them in her lace,’ said the others. ‘She’s made you look like an old vamp!’

‘I may be getting on now,’ said Grannie Liu, ‘but I used to be a stylish young woman in my time. I loved to have a bit of powder for my cheek and a flower to wear in my hair. ‘Tis no matter: now I shall be a stylish *old* ‘un.’

During this exchange they had been moving towards Drenched Blossoms Pavilion. Maids went on ahead with a rolled-up patterned rug which they spread out on one of the bench-boards that ran along the inner sides of the balustrades. Seating herself on the rug with her back against the railings, Grandmother Jia invited Grannie Liu to sit down beside her and tell her what she thought of the Garden.

‘Holy Name!’ said Grannie Liu. ‘You know, we country folk like to get a picture at the New Year that we can stick up on the wall. Every year just before New Year the farmers come into town to buy one. Many’s the time of an evening when the day’s work was done we’ve sat and looked at the picture on *our* wall and wished we could get inside it and walk around, never imagining that such beautiful places could really be. Yet now I look at this Garden here, and it’s ten times better than any picture I ever saw. If only I could get someone to make a painting of it all, just the way it is, that I could take back to show the others, I do believe I should die content!’

Grandmother Jia smilingly pointed a linger in Xi-chun direction.

‘You see my little great-niece over there? *She* can paint. Shall we get *her* to do you a painting of it?’

Grannie Liu jumped up and going over to xi-chun, took her impulsively by the hand.

‘Dear Miss!’ she said. ‘To think that one so young and pretty should be so gifted and all! I do believe you must be one of the holy spirits born in a human shape!’

The simple earnestness with which this was uttered made the others all laugh. After resting a little longer, Grand mother Jia, who intended to show her guest as much of the Garden as possible, got up again and resumed the tour.

The first place they came to was the Naiad’s House. The **green** bamboos engulfed them as they entered the gate and brilliant **green** moss carpeted the ground beneath. Through the midst of the bamboos a raised cobbled path wound its way towards the house. Grannie Liu stepped aside to let Grand-mother Jia and the rest walk on it while she herself walked on the ground below. Amber held a hand out to draw her up.

‘Walk on the path, Grannie! You’ll slip on the moss down there.’

‘Don’t you mind me, my dear!’ said Grannie Liu. ‘I’m used to it. You keep to the path, though, with the rest. You don’t want to muddy those fancy shoes of yours.’

Unfortunately the necessity of looking up to talk to someone who was walking at a higher level had distracted her attention from the ground beneath, and even as she said this, her feet slipped on the treacherous moss, her legs flew out from under her, and she landed on her posterior with a thump. The girls clapped their hands delightedly. Grandmother Jia laughed too, though trying her hardest to sound cross.

‘Little monsters!’ she said, ‘Don’t just stand there laughing. Help her up!’

But Grannie Liu bad already scrambled up unaided, and was laughing herself.

‘It serves me right,’ she said. ‘I shouldn’t have spoken so soon!’

‘Are you sure you haven’t hurt your back?’ Grandmother Jia asked her. ‘Let one of the maids massage it for you.’

‘God bless my soul!’ said Grannie Liu. ‘I’m not *that* delicate! I don’t suppose a day goes by but what I take a tumble or two. If I was to have meself massaged every time, it would never

Nightingale was already waiting with the bamboo blind raised for them to enter. Grandmother Jia led her party through the doorway and sat down inside. Dai-yu waited on her in person; offering her tea in a covered cup which she carried on a little tray.

‘We shan’t be taking tea, niece,’ said Lady Wang. ‘Don’t bother to pour for the rest of us.’

Hearing this, Dai-yu ordered one of the maids to fetch the chair by the window that she normally sat on herself and bring it up for her aunt to sit on. Grannie Liu noticed the inkstone and brushes on the table in front of it and all the books on the bookshelves and said that she supposed this must be ‘the young gentleman’s study’.

Grandmother Jia smiled and pointed to Dai-yu

‘It belongs to her my little grand-daughter.’

As though incredulous, Grannie Liu studied Dai-yu attentively for some moments in silence.

‘It doesn’t look at all like a young lady’s room,’ she said finally. ‘It looks to me like a very high-class young gentleman’s study.’

‘Where *is* Bao-yu, by the way?’ said Grandmother Jia.

‘He’s on the lake in one of the punts,’ said the maids.

‘Oh? Whose idea was it to get the punts Out?’ she asked.

‘It was my idea,’ said Li Wan hurriedly. ‘It occurred to me just now when we were getting things out of the storeroom that you might perhaps feel like going on the water today.’

Grandmother Jia was about to make some comment when Aunt Xue’s arrival was announced and she rose up, together with the rest of the company, to welcome her.

‘Aren’t you energetic today, Lady Jia!’ said Aunt Xue smilingly when all were seated once more. ‘Here already!’

‘We were just discussing what sort of fine to impose on late arrivals,’ said Grandmother Jia teasingly. ‘We didn’t have you in mind, of course!’

A certain amount of good-humoured banter followed. In the course of it Grandmother Jia chanced to notice that the gauze in Dai-yu’s windows was faded, and drew Lady Wang’s attention to it.

‘This kind of gauze looks very well on a window when it’s new,’ she said, ‘but after a while it loses its **green**ness. **Green** isn’t a suitable colour for the windows here in any case. There are no peach or apricot trees outside to make a contrast when they are in flower, and there is already enough **green** in all those bamboos. I seem to remember that we used to have four or five different shades of window gauze somewhere or other.

You must look some out tomorrow for her and have this changed.'

'The other day when I had to open the silk-store,' said Xi-feng, 'I came across a lot of rose-coloured "cicada wing" gauze in a long wooden chest. It was a beautiful fresh colour and the material was beautifully soft and light. I don't think I've ever seen any quite like it before. I'd like to have taken a couple of lengths of it for facing quilts with. I'm sure it would make lovely quilts.'

'Pooh I said Grandmother Jia scornfully. 'I thought you were supposed to be such an authority on materials—and you can't even name a gauze properly! You're not as clever as you thought, my girl! You'll have to watch your tongue a bit in future.'

Aunt Xue put in an extenuating word for her niece, while laughing with the rest at her discomfiture.

'However much of an authority she may be, I'm sure she would never presume to compete with you, Lady Jia. If she is wrong about the gauze, you must give her the benefit of your greater experience and put her right. I am sure the rest of us would like to know too.'

'As a matter of fact that gauze is a good deal older than any of you here,' said Grandmother Jia, 'so it is not very surprising that Feng mistook it for cicada wing. There *is* a certain resemblance, and cicada wing is what anyone would most likely take it to be who hadn't seen it before. The proper name for it, though, is "haze diaphene".'

'What a pretty name!' said xi-feng. 'I must have seen several hundred different gauzes in my time; but I must confess I've never heard *that* name mentioned before.'

Grandmother Jia laughed.

'And what great age have you now reached, my dear, to be talking so freely about your vast experience? Haze diaphene used to come in four colours: "clear-sky **blue**", "russet **green**", "pine **green**" and "old rose". Hung up as bed-curtains or pasted in windows it looks from a distance like a coloured haze. That's why they called it *"haze* diaphene". The old rose kind is sometimes called "afterglow". You won't find fabric made as fine or as soft as that nowadays, not even among the gauzes made for the Imperial Household.'

'Never mind about Feng,' said Aunt Xue, 'I've never heard about this kind of gauze before either.'

While they continued to talk about it, Xi-feng sent someone to fetch a piece from the storeroom.

'That's right, that's it!' said Grandmother Jia when it arrived. 'When we first had it, we used it only for covering windows with, but later on we began experimenting and found that it made very good quilts and bed-curtains as well. Get a few lengths of it out tomorrow. You can use the "old rose" kind to re-cover these windows with.'

Xi-feng promised to see to it. Meanwhile the others were examining the gauze and admiring its quality. Grannie Liu was particularly impressed, uttering a whole series of 'Holy Names' as she subjected it to close and careful scrutiny. 'I could never hope to get anything as good as this to make a *dress* with,' she said. 'It seems a terrible waste to use it on *windows.'*

'Actually it isn't much good for clothing,' said Grandmother Jia.

'What about this, then?' said Xi-feng, pulling out a flap of the quilted **crimson** gauze dress she was wearing underneath her jacket and holding it up for them to see.

'Yes, very fine,' said Grandmother Jia, examining it. 'Ah, yes, now there you are! *This* is a modern Imperial Household gauze; but you see it's still not as good as that one there.'

'Well, what do you make of that?' said Xi-feng. 'That one there is only an' 'Official Use" fabric, yet this one I'm wearing, which isn't as good quality, is "Imperial H6usehold" !'

'Anyway, have another look tomorrow,' said Grandmother Jia. 'I think you'll find that besides the "old

rose" pieces you saw in that chest, there's a lot of "clear-sky **blue**" somewhere as well. If there is, get it all out; give a length of it to our kinswoman here; I should like two lengths myself for a set of bed-hangings; and any left over can be matched with suitable lining-material and made up into waistcoats for the girls. There's no point in keeping it until it gets mildewed.'

Xi-feng, having first promised that she would do all these things, told the servant who had brought the sample to take it back to the storeroom.

'We're a bit cramped in here,' said Grandmother Jia. 'Let's move on to somewhere else now.'

'They say that "great families live in great houses",' said Grannie Liu, 'and truly, when I first went into Your Ladyship's apartment yesterday and saw those great chests and cupboards and tables and beds, the size of everything fairly took my breath away. That great wardrobe of yours is higher and wider than one of our rooms back home. I'm not surprised you keep a ladder in the back courtyard. When I first saw it, I thought to myself, "Now what can they need a ladder for? They don't ripen things on the roofs as we do, so it can't be for that." And then of course I realized: it must be for getting things out of the compartment on top of that ward-robe of yours, for you could never reach it else. And yet this place here, for all it's so much smaller, seems to me more perfect than your big one. The things here are all so pretty. I don't know what they are, some of them, but the more I look at them, the less I want to leave!'

'There are other pretty places besides this,' said Xi-feng. 'We're taking you to see them all.'

As they left the Naiad's House, they could make out, at some distance from where they stood, a number of people punting on the lake. Remarking that since the boats were already out they might just as well use them, Grandmother Jia conducted her little party in the general direction of Amaryllis Eyot and Flowery Harbour. Before they had reached the water's edge, however, a number of elderly women approached, each bearing one of those large summer food-boxes of the kind they make in Soochow, with tops and bottoms of varicoloured lacquer-work delicately patterned in needle-engraving of gold, and panels of gilded bamboo basket-work in their sides. Seeing them approach, Xi-feng asked Lady Wang where she wanted lunch to be laid.

'Ask Grandmother,' said Lady Wang. 'Wherever *she* wants it, of course.'

Grandmother Jia, who had been moving on, now turned back to tell them.

'Your Cousin Tan's would be a nice place to have it. You go on ahead and lay it there, and the rest of us will follow by boat.'

Xi-feng, accompanied by Li Wan, Tan-chun, Faithful and Amber, led the women with the lunch-boxes by a short cut to the Autumn Studio. They put Out a couple of tables there in the Paulownia Room.

'We're often hearing how the gentlemen at their parties outside have a buffoon to provide them with their laughs,' said Faithful while they were getting ready. 'Today we've got a buffoon of our own—a female one.'

Li Wan, being a good, simple soul, did not understand what she meant; but Xi-feng knew immediately that she was referring to Grannie Liu and gleefully agreeing that they should have some laughs at the old woman's expense, at once began plotting something with Faithful.

'You two are *awful!'* Li Wan protested laughingly. 'Anyone would think you were a couple of mischievous children. And what will Lady Jia say?'

'Don't worry, Mrs Zhu!' said Faithful. 'You won't be involved in this one little bit. I promise to keep you out of it.'

Grandmother Jia now arrived with the others, the company sat down informally, and maids went round and served every one with tea. When they had all finished their tea, Xi-feng came in carrying a bundle of silver-tipped and silver-ornamented ebony chopsticks wrapped in a West Ocean linen napkin, and proceeded to lay the places.

‘Put that little **yellow** cedar-wood table next to my place so that Mrs Liu can sit by me,’ said Grandmother Jia.

As the maids hastened to comply, Xi-feng tipped a wink at Faithful, who took the opportunity presented by this diversion to draw Grannie Lu aside and quietly brief her on the decorums to be observed by anyone eating with the family.

‘It’s part of the rules of this household,’ she told tile old woman in conclusion. ‘If you don’t do it properly, they will laugh at you.’

The places being now all laid, the company sat down to table, with the exception of Aunt Xue, who had eaten already and continued sitting where she was, drinking tea. Bao-yu, Xiang-yun, Dai-yu and Bao-chai sat at one of the two large tables with Grandmother Jia at their head, and Ying-chun, Tan-chun and Xi-chun sat at the other one, presided over by Lady Wang. Grannie Liu had a little table of her own next to Grandmother Jia.

Normally when Grandmother Jia took her meals it was the junior maids who stood with spittoons, fly-whisks and napkins in their hands behind the chairs. Faithful had long since graduated from such menial duties. On this occasion, however, she borrowed a fly-whisk from one of the younger girls and did some whisking herself. This was a signal for the other maids, who knew that something was afoot, to melt discreetly away, leaving the stage clear for Faithful. Fly-whisk in hand, Faithful took up a position on her own and darted a questioning glance at her victim.

‘All right, Miss, don’t worry!’ said Grannie Liu, and having settled herself in her place, picked up her chopsticks. She found them extremely heavy and unwieldy. They were a pair of old-fashioned, square-handled ivory ones inlaid with gold, which Xi-feng and Faithful had planted on her in furtherance of their plan.

What’s this you’ve given me?’ said Grannie Liu. ‘A pair of tongs? These are heavier than one of our iron shovels. I shall never be able to manage with these.’

The others all laughed.

A woman-servant now entered carrying one of the luncheonboxes and stood in the middle of the room holding it while a maid removed the lid. There were two dishes inside. Li Wan took out one of them and set it down on Grandmother Jia’s table. The second, a bowl of pigeon’s eggs (deliberately chosen for their mirth-provoking possibilities) was taken out by Xi-feng and set down in front of Grannie Liu.

‘Please!’ said Grandmother Jia, waving her chopsticks at the food as a polite indication that they should begin. At once Grannie Liu leaped to her feet and, in ringing tones, recited the following grace:

‘My name it is Liu,
I’m a trencherman true;
I can eat a whole sow
With her little pigs too.’

Having concluded, she puffed out both her cheeks and stared in front of her with an expression of great determination.

There was a moment of awestruck silence; then, as it dawned on them that they really had heard what they thought they had heard, the whole company, both masters and servants, burst out into roars of laughter.

Shi Xiang-yun, unable to contain herself, spat out a whole mouthful of rice.

Lin Dai-yu, made breathless by laughter, collapsed on the table, uttering weak ‘Aiyos’.

Bao-yu rolled over, convulsed, on to his grandmother’s bosom.

Grandmother Jia, exclaiming helplessly ‘Oh, my heart!’ ‘Oh, my child!’, clung tightly to her heaving grandson.

Lady Wang pointed an accusing finger at Xi-feng, but laughter had deprived her of speech.

Aunt Xue exploded a mouthful of tea over Tan-chun’s skirt.

Tan-chun planted a bowlful of rice on the person of Ying-chun.

Xi-chun got up from the table and going over to her nurse, took her by the hand and asked her to massage her stomach.

The servants were all doubled up. Some had to go outside where they could squat down and laugh with abandon. Those who could control themselves sufficiently helped the casualties to mop up or change their clothes.

Only Xi-feng and Faithful remained straight-faced throughout this outburst, politely urging Grannie Liu to begin. Manipulating the unwieldy chopsticks with considerable difficulty, the old woman prepared to do so.

‘Even your hens here are special,’ she remarked. ‘Such pretty little eggs they lay! I must see if I can’t get one of these under me belt!’

Under the impact of these remarks the company’s composure, which it had only just recovered, once more broke down. Grandmother Jia, abandoning any attempt at self-control, was now actually weeping with laughter. Amber, who feared a seizure, pounded her energetically on the back.

‘That wicked devil Feng is behind this,’ said Grandmother Jia. ‘Don’t believe a thing she tells you!’

‘They cost a silver tael apiece,’ said Xi-feng, as Grannie Liu continued to praise the diminutive ‘hen’s’ eggs. ‘You should eat them quickly, while they’re still hot, They won’t be so nice when they’re cold.’

Grannie Liu obediently held out her chopsticks and tried to take hold of one, but the egg eluded her. After chasing it several times round the inside of the bowl, she did at last succeed in getting a grip on it. But as she craned forward with open mouth to reach it, it slipped through the chopsticks and rolled on to the floor. At once she laid down the chopsticks, and would have gone down on hands and knees to pick it up, but before she could do so one of the servants had retrieved it and carried it off for disposal.

‘That’s a tael of silver gone,’ Grannie Liu said regretfully, ‘and we didn’t even hear the clink!’

The others had by now lost all interest in eating, absorbed by the entertaining antics of their guest.

‘Who got those chopsticks out?’ said Grandmother Jia. ‘They’re not meant for occasions like this; they’re for using at formal banquets. Whoever it was, I expect it was that wicked Feng who put them up to it. Take them away at once and get her another pair!’

The servants had in point of fact had nothing to do with the chryselephantine chopsticks, which had been smuggled in at the last moment by Faithful and Xi-feng; nevertheless, on hearing the order, they obediently came forward and replaced them with a silver and ebony pair like those that had been provided for the rest.

‘Out goes gold and in comes silver!’ said Grannie Liu. ‘But when all’s said and done, our wooden ones at home are handier.’

‘If there’s any poison in what you are eating,’ said Xi-feng, ‘the silver will tell you by changing colour.’

‘If this food is poisoned,’ said Grannie Liu, ‘then what we eat at home must be pure arsenic. Anyway, I intend to eat it all, come what may I’

Delighted to have found someone who, besides being so amusing, had so evident a relish for her food, Grandmother Jia insisted on making all her own portion over to Grannie Liu and ordered one of the older women to go round with a pair of chopsticks and a bowl and make a selection from all the dishes to give to little Ban-er.

Presently, when they had finished eating, Grandmother Jia and the others moved into Tan-chun’s bedroom

for a chat, while in the Paulownia Room the servants cleared away the remains of the meal and hastily relaid a table for Li Wan and Xi-feng. Grannie Liu, who had lingered behind, observed them sitting down at opposite sides of it to begin their meal. She was greatly impressed by this glimpse of the upper-class etiquette which requires young married women to eat on their own when the rest have finished.

'What I like best of all here,' she said, 'is your way of doing things. I'm not surprised they say that "good breeding is to be found in great houses".'

The compliment was sincerely meant, but Xi-feng understood it in a different sense.

'I do hope we haven't hurt your feelings,' she said. 'It was only a joke, you know.'

The words were scarcely out of her mouth when Faithful came hurrying in.

'Please don't be offended, Mrs Liu. I've come in to apologize.'

'Bless you, I'm not offended!' said Grannie Liu. 'We were only cheering up Her Ladyship, dear old soul. What should I be offended for ? I knew when you told me to say those things it was only for a laugh. If I'd felt offended, I should never have said them.'

A chastened Faithful turned angrily on the other servants. 'Come on! why aren't you pouring Mrs Liu some tea?' 'That's all right,' said Grannie Liu hurriedly. 'I've had some already. I drank the tea that the young woman handed to me a while ago. You get on with your own lunch, Miss. Don't mind me!'

Xi-feng took Faithful by the hand.

'Yes, eat now with us. It'll keep you out of mischief.' Faithful sat down and one of the old women laid another bowl for her and another pair of chopsticks. When the three young women had finished, Grannie Liu, who had been watching them, remarked on how little they had eaten.

'None of you here seems to eat more than a bite or two,' she said. 'It's a marvel to me you're not famished. No wonder you all look as if the wind could blow you over!'

'There *is* a lot left over today,' Faithful commented. 'Where are all the others?' she asked the old serving-woman.

'They're still here in waiting, Miss,' said the old woman. 'They're not off duty yet. We can give it to them, if you like, before they go.'

'They'll never finish all this lot,' said Faithful. 'Pick out a couple of bowlfuls and take them to Patience in Mrs Lian's room.'

'No need,' said Xi-feng. 'She's had her lunch already.'

'If she can't eat it herself, she can give it to the cat,' said Faithful.

The old woman put the contents of two of the dishes into a box and carried it off to give Patience.

'Where's Candida ?' said Faithful.

'She's in there eating with the rest,' said Li Wan. 'What do you want her for?'

'It's all right,' said Faithful. 'Nothing.'

'Aroma isn't here,' said Xi-feng. 'Why don't you send *her* a couple of dishes ?'

Faithful gave orders for this to be done. She inquired of the remaining old women whether the boxes for the drinking party were ready yet.

'I think they'll be a while yet,' said one of them.

'Hurry them up a bit, will you?' said Faithful, and the old woman went off to do her bidding.

The young women, accompanied by Grannie Liu, now went into Tan-chun's room, where Grandmother Jia and the others were chatting and laughing together.

This room, a three-frame apartment which Tan-chun, who loved spaciousness, had left undivided, had in the midst of it a large rosewood table with a Yunnanese marble top piled high with specimen-books of calligraphy and littered with several dozen miscellaneous ink-stones and a small forest of writing-brushes standing in brush-holders and brush-stands of every conceivable shape and size. On one side of the table was a bucket-sized 'pincushion' flower-vase of Ru ware stuck all over with snow-white pompom chrysanthemums. On the west wall of the room hung a 'Landscape in Mist and Rain' by Mi Fei, flanked by a pair of scrolls bearing a couplet written by the Tang calligrapher Yan Zhen-qing:

My heart has discovered true ease amidst the clouds and mists of the mountains;
My life has gained a fierce freedom from the rocks and torrents of the fells.

Against the wall beneath was a long, high table. On it, towards the left, stood a large Northern Song porcelain dish heaped with those ornamental citrus fruits they call 'Buddha's hands', whose brilliant **yellow** contrasted agreeably with the **green**ish **blue** of the glaze. To the right a white jade chime in the form of a two-headed fish hung in a varnished wooden frame to whose side a tiny hammer was attached. Ban-er, whom growing familiarity was making bolder, was with difficulty restrained from unfastening the hammer and striking the fish with it. He then said that he wanted one of the '**yellow** things' to eat, and Tan-chun selected a Buddha's hand from the dish and gave it to him.

'There you are,' she said, 'but it's only to play with. It isn't good to eat.'

On the opposite side of the room was a large four-poster bed whose silk gauze hangings had a pattern of bright **green** plants and insects in reversible embroidery. Ban-er ran over to it and began identifying the insects:

'That's a cricket. That's a grasshopper

Grannie Liu dealt him a hefty slap

'Little varmint! Who said you could go running around putting your dirty hands on everything? Just because you've been allowed in to have a look, it doesn't mean you have to start getting above yourself.'

The blow had been hard enough to make him cry, and it took the combined efforts of the others present to comfort him.

Meanwhile Grandmother Jia had been looking through the gauze-covered windows into the courtyard behind.

'Those paulownias by the verandah eaves are still very fine,' she remarked. 'It's a pity they've begun losing their leaves.'

A little gust of wind blew across the courtyard as she spoke, bearing on. it a faint strain of music from outside.

'That must be a wedding,' she said. 'I didn't realize we were so near to the street here.'

'You could never hear the street from *here*, Mother,' said Lady Wang, laughing. 'Those are our twelve little actresses rehearsing.'

'If they're going to be playing anyway,' said Grandmother Jia, 'we may as well have them to play in here. It will be entertainment for *us* and it will make an Outing of sorts for *them.*'

Xi-feng at once ordered the troupe to be summoned, and made hurried arrangements for a long table to be brought in, that the actresses could sit down to perform at, and covered with a **red** rug.

'Much better put them in Xi-chun's water pavilion,' said Grandmother Jia. 'The music will sound even better coming across the water. Later on when we take our wine we can sit in the

downstairs of the Painted Chamber. It's nice and open there and close enough to the pavilion for listening to the

music from.'

Everyone agreed that this would be a good idea.

Grandmother Jia now turned with a smile to Aunt Xue.

'I think we'd better be on our way now. These young people don't much like having visitors, you know. They are terrified of getting their rooms dirty. We mustn't be tactless and overstay our welcome. I think we'd better take another little turn in the boats now, and then it will be just about time to go and have our drinks.'

'How unfair!' said Tan-chun laughing. 'When I *ask* you or Mother or Aunt Xue to come here, you never do.'

'Oh, my little Tan is all right,' said Grandmother Jia. 'It's those two Yus who are so detestable. We shall go and brawl in *their* rooms later on when we are drunk!'

The others (including the detestable Yus) all laughed.

Emerging in a single group from the Autumn Studio, they arrived after a short walk at Duckweed Island, where their specially imported Soochow boatwomen were waiting with two elegantly decorated punts. Grandmother Jia, Lady Wang, Aunt Xue, Grannie Liu, Faithful and Silver were handed one by one aboard the first one. They were joined a little later by Li Wan, and finally by Xi-feng, who stood in the bows and said she was going to punt.

'Feng!' Grandmother Jia called nervously from inside the cabin. 'It's too dangerous to fool about. It isn't like the open river here, but it's still quite deep. Come in here with us!'

'It's all right, Grannie! Don't be nervous!' said Xi-feng, laughing, as she shoved off from the bank. But the punt, being somewhat overloaded, was hard to manage, so that by the time they were in midstream she was already in difficulties and had to hand the pole over to one of the boatwomen and sit down rather abruptly on her haunches.

When their elders were safely away, Bao-yu and the six girls got into the second punt and were poled along in the wake of the first one. The maids and older women proceeded in the same direction on foot along the shore.

These raggedy-looking lotus4eaves everywhere are rather ugly,' said Bao-yu. 'I can't think why they haven't been cleared away.'

'Now when *could* they have been?' said Bao-chai. 'With parties being held here practically every day this autumn, the Garden has never been free long enough.'

'I can't abide the poems of Li Shang-yin,' said Dai-yu, 'but there is just one line of his that I am rather fond of:

Leaves but dead lotus-leaves for the rain to play on.

Trust you *not* to "leave the dead lotus-leaves"!'

'It *is* a good line, I agree,' said Bao-yu. 'We'll tell them that in future they are *not* to remove them.'

They were drifting into Flowery Harbour now, and the dank chill of its creeper-hung grotto seemed to penetrate their bones. Dead reeds and dying caltrop-leaves added to the autumnal melancholy of the scene. A clean, airy-looking building was visible at some distance beyond the bank above.

'Isn't that Bao-chai's place?' said Grandmother Jia.

On being told that it was, she asked the women to moor the boats there, and having disembarked, ascended

from the landing-stage by a flight of cloud-shaped stone steps and proceeded, with the rest of the party, to the gateway of Allspice Court.

A delectable fragrance assailed their nostrils as they entered. Outside the house the leaves of the mysterious, unnamable creepers had turned an even intenser **green** in the colder weather, and where before there had been flowers, there now hung trusses of the most beautiful coral-red berries. Indoors, however, it was stark and bare. The only decoration in Bao-chai's room was a vase of the cheaper kind of Ding ware on the table, with a few chrysanthemums in it. Apart from the flowers there were only a few books and some tea-things on the table. The bed-hangings were of black gauze, and the quilts and covers were of the same forbidding plainness as the hangings.

'This child is really *too* self-effacing!' Grandmother Jia muttered, evidently shocked by what she saw. The tone in which she addressed Bao-chai was a somewhat reproachful one: 'If you haven't any things of your own, why ever didn't you as your Aunt Wang for some? I'm afraid I never thought about it before. Of course. I realize now. You must have left all your stuff behind in Nanking.'

She at once ordered Faithful to supply Bao-chai with some Ornaments, and then turned, with some asperity, on Xi-feng.

'Really, Feng! I do think it *rather* stingy of you! Couldn't y6u have spared your cousin a few *knick-knacks?'*

Lady Wang and Xi-feng both laughed.

'She said herself that she didn't want any. We g*ave* her some things, but she sent them all back again.'

Aunt Xue corroborated this.

'She was just the same in Nanking, Lady Jia. She's never cared much for that sort of thing.'

Grandmother Jia shook her head.

'That will never do. It saves trouble, no doubt, to keep one's room so bare. But what would any of our relations think if they were to come here and see this? Besides, it isn't natural for a young girl to be so austere. If girls are to live so austerely, what sort of a stable ought an old woman like me to live in? Think of the descriptions of young ladies' boudoirs you find in plays and romances such exquisite refinement of luxury! I'm not exactly suggesting that you should emulate *them*—but you shouldn't fall *too* far short, all the same. After all, when the things are there for the asking, it seems silly not to use them. Use them sparingly, by all means, if your tastes are on the austere side; but don't dispense with them altogether! I've always had rather a flair for decorating interiors. I don't exercise it much nowadays, because I'm too old; but I think the girls have inherited a little of it from me. The thing one always has to be on one's guard against is bad taste -which generally means no more than arranging good things in a bad way. I don't think any of my girls has bad taste. Now why don't you let me decorate this room for you? I promise you it shall look both dignified and austere. There are still a few things tucked away in my dowry that Bao-yu doesn't know about. ('wouldn't let *him* see them, or they'd have disappeared long ago!).'

She called Faithful to her and instructed her what to bring. 'I want you to fetch that *bonseki* and the little screen and the little tripod of smoky agate. Those three things arranged on the table here will be enough. There's also a set of white satin hangings hand-painted in black ink. I'd like you to get them too and put them up in place of these bed-curtains.'

'Yes, madam,' said Faithful. 'But these things are all stored in the attic over the east wing and I'm not sure which chests they're in, so it will take me quite a while to find them. Can't I leave it until tomorrow ?'

'Tomorrow or the day after tomorrow is immaterial,' said Grandmother Jia, 'as long as it gets done.'

After sitting for a while longer in Bao-chai's room, they got up and again moved on to the covered area underneath the Painted Chamber. Élégante and the other little actresses came forward to make their curtseys and to inquire what pieces they should play.

'Choose a few of the ones you are most familiar with,' said Grandmother Jia, and the little actresses went off to the Lotus Pavilion. No further mention of them is made in this part of our narrative.

Supervised by Xi-feng, the servants had by now completed the seating arrangements for the drinking-party. Two wooden couches covered with woven grass mats and embroidered cushions had been placed side by side at the head. Each had a pair of carved lacquer tables in front of it. On one of each pair there was an incense set—a miniature metal vase, a miniature cassolette and a miniature tripod, all for burning different kinds of incense in - on the other was a large lacquer box. These two couches with a pair of tables each were for Grandmother Jia and Aunt Xue.

Of the places ranged below them only one, Lady Wang's, had a couch and two tables; all the rest had one table and a chair. On the east side, nearest to Grandmother Jia, sat Grannie Liu with Lady Wang below her; on the west side Xiang-yun had been laid first, nearest to Aunt Xue, then Bao-chai, then Dai-yu, then Ying-chun, then Tan-chun, then Xi-chun, with Bao-yu in the very last place of all. A table and chairs had been laid for Li Wan and Xi-feng between the inner and outer mosquito screens which protected those inside the room from the insects of the lake.

The little lacquer tables were of many different shapes—some four-lobed like a begonia leaf, some five4obed like plum-flowers, some shaped like multi-petalled sunflowers, some like lotus leaves, some square, some round - and the lacquer boxes were designed to match the shapes of the tables. Everyone had his own nielloed silver 'self-service' wine kettle and a little polychrome cloisonné winecup.

'Well now,' said Grandmother Jia when they were all seated, 'let's have a cup or two to warm up on, and after that I think it would be more fun if we played a drinking game.'

'I am sure you know lots of good ones,' said Aunt Xue, 'but what about the rest of us? I am afraid this is just a trick to make us all drunk. We might just as well drink the extra cups now, since we're bound to lose anyway, and forget about the game!'

'Come, Mrs Xue, you're being excessively modest all of a sudden!' said Grandmother Jia. 'But perhaps you think I'm too *old* for this sort of thing?'

'No, no, no. And I'm *not* being modest, either,' said Aunt Xue, laughing. 'I am afraid of not being able to give the answers and making a fool of myself.'

'Even if we can't give the answers,' said Lady Wang, 'it only means drinking a few more cups of wine. And if we get drunk, we can go to bed. No one is going to laugh at us, I hope!'

Aunt Xue smiled and nodded.

'Very well, I shall do as I am told then. But I think Lady Jia ought to drink a cup first, as proposer of the game.'

'Of course,' said Grandmother Jia, and drained off a cup forthwith.

Xi-feng stepped forward into their midst to make a proposal:

'If you are going to play a drinking game, may I suggest that you have Faithful as your M. C.?'

The others, knowing that when Grandmother Jia played drinking games it was generally Faithful who helped her out, agreed readily to this proposal, whereupon Xi-feng went to fetch Faithful and drew her into their midst.

'If Faithful is going to be our M. C.,' said Lady Wang, 'we can't possibly have her standing up all the time.'

She turned to one of the little maids behind her: ‘Put a chair for her over there, will you, where Mrs Zhu and Mrs Lian are sitting.’

When the chair had been brought, Faithful, offering polite resistance, allowed herself to be propelled towards it, and having first apologized for the liberty of doing so, sat down. At once she established her authority by drinking a bumper-cup.

‘Right,’ she said. ‘The rules of drinking are as strict as the rules of war. Now that you’ve made me your M. C., any of you who doesn’t do exactly as I say, no matter who it is, has to pay a forfeit.’

‘Agreed, agreed,’ said the others. ‘Hurry up and tell us what the game is.’

Before she could do so, Grannie Liu, waving her hand in protest, got up and began to go.

‘’Tisn’t right to make sport of folks like this. I’m going home!’

‘No, no, we :can’t have that!’ said the others, laughing.

‘Back to the chair with her!’ Faithful shouted to the younger maids. They complied gleefully, seizing the old woman on either side and marching her back to her seat.

‘Let me off this game!’ she pleaded, as they forced her into it; but Faithful was adamant.

‘Another word from you,’ she said, ‘and you’ll be made to drink a whole kettleful as a punishment.’

Grannie Liu’s protests then ceased.

‘What I’m going to do,’ said Faithful, ‘is to call threesomes with the dominoes, starting from Her Old Ladyship, going round in an anti-clockwise direction, and ending up with Mrs Liu. First I shall make a separate call for each of the three dominoes and after that I shall make a call for the whole threesome, so you’ll get four calls each. Every time I call, you’ve got to answer with something that rhymes and that has some connection with the call. it can be something from a poem or song or ballad, or it can be a proverb or some well-known expression anything you like as long as there is a connection and it rhymes.’

‘Good!’ said the others approvingly. ‘That’s a good game. Let’s have a call then.’

‘Right,’ said Faithful. ‘Here comes the first one.’ She laid down a double six. ‘On my left the bright **blue** sky.’[6]

‘The Lord looks down from heaven on high,’ said Grand-mother Jia.

‘Bravo!’ said the others

The second domino was a five-six.

‘Five and six together meet,’ said Faithful.

‘By Six Bay Bridge the flowers smell sweet.’

‘Leaves six and ace upon the right.’

‘The **red** sun in the sky so bright,’ said Grandmother Jia.

‘Altogether that makes: “A shock-headed devil with hair like tow”,’ said Faithful.

‘The devil shouts, “Zhong Kui, let me go!”,’ said Grandmother Jia.

Amidst laughter, and applause for the successful completion of her turn, she picked up and drained her winecup.

‘Here comes the next one,’ said Faithful, laying down a double five. ‘On my left all the fives I find.’

‘Plum-blossoms dancing in the wind,’ said Aunt Xue.

‘On my right all the fives again,’ said Faithful.

‘Plum-blossoms in the tenth month’s rain,’ said Aunt Xue.

‘Between them, two and five make seven.’

[6] See Appendix II, p. 586

‘On Seventh Night the lovers meet in heaven.’

‘Together that gives: “The Second Prince plays in the Five Holy Hills”.’

‘The immortals dwell far off from mortal ills.’

Again there was applause, and Aunt Xue drank her wine.

‘Next threesome coming up,’ said Faithful. ‘All the aces, one and one.’

‘Two lamps for earth, the moon and sun,’ said Xiang-yun.

‘On my right once more aces all.’

‘And flowers to earth in silence fall,’ said Xiang-yun.

‘Between them, ace again with four.’

‘Apricot trees make the sun’s red-petalled floor,’ said Xiang-yun.

‘Together that makes nine ripe cherries.’

‘Winged thieves have stripped the Emperor’s trees of berries,’ said Xiang-yun, and drank her wine.

‘A pair on the left then, three and three,’ said Faithful.

‘Swallows in pairs round the old roof-tree,’ said Bao-chai.

‘A pair of threes upon the right,’ said Faithful.

‘Green duckweed-trails on the water bright.’

‘A three and six between them lie.’

‘Three peaks upon the rim of sky,’ said Bao-chai. ‘Together that gives “The lone boat tied with an iron chain”,’ said Faithful.

‘The waves on every hand and the heart’s pain,’ said Bao-chai, and drank what remained in her winecup.

‘Sky on the left, the good fresh air,’ said Faithful, putting down a double six.

‘Bright air and brilliant morn feed my despair,’ said Dai-yu. Bao-chai, recognizing the quotation, turned and stared; but Dai-yu was too intent on keeping her end up to have noticed.

‘A four and a six, the Painted Screen,’ said Faithful.

‘No Reddie at the window seen,’ said Dai-yu, desperately dredging up a line this time from *The Western Chamber* to meet the emergency.

‘A two and a six, four twos make eight.’

‘In twos walk backwards from the Hall of State,’ said Dai-yu, on safer ground with a line from Du Fu.

‘Together makes: “A basket for the flowers you pick”,’ said Faithful.

‘A basket of peonies slung from his stick,’ Dai-yu concluded, and took a sip of her wine.

‘Four and five, the Flowery Nine,’ said Faithful.

‘The *flowering* peach-tree drenched with rain,’ said Ying chun.

‘Forfeit! Forfeit!’ said the others, laughing. ‘It doesn’t rhyme; and besides, the words don’t fit.’

Ying-chun laughed and sipped her wine. As a matter of fact her failure was intentional. Eager for more laughs, Xi-feng and Faithful had secretly intimated to the four remaining cousins that they should give the wrong answers on purpose, in order to come the more quickly to Grannie Liu. Accordingly Tan-chun, Xi-chun and Bao-yu, all deliberately fell down on their first calls as well, leaving only Lady Wang to dispose of, which Faithful accomplished by the simple expedient of supplying the answers for her herself. It was now Grannie Liu’s turn.

‘We often play a game like this ourselves back home when we get together of an evening,’ said Grannie Liu,

‘only the way we do it, it doesn’t sound so pretty as this. Howsomever. I don’t mind having a try.’

‘It’s easy, really,’ said the others. ‘Don’t worry about what it sounds like. Just say what comes naturally.’

Faithful began to lay.

‘A pair of fours on the left, the Man.’

Grannie Liu was a good long while puzzling over this. Finally she said.

‘Is it a farmer?’

The others roared with laughter.

‘That’s all right,’ said Grandmother Jia reassuringly. ‘That answer will do very well.’

‘You young people shouldn’t laugh at me,’ said Grannie Liu to the others. ‘I’m a countrywoman born and I can’t help my country talk.’

‘Green three, **red** four, contrasting colours,’ called Faithful.

‘The fire burns up the caterpillars,’ said Grannie Liu.

‘Why, so it might,’ said the others. ‘Stick to your “country talk”, Grannie, you’re doing fine!’

‘Red four on the right and the ace is **red,**’ said Faithful.

‘A turnip and a garlic-head.’

More laughter.

‘ “That Flower” those three together show,’ said Faithful.

‘This flower will to a pumpkin grow,’ said the flower-bedecked ancient, gesturing with her hands to demonstrate the size of the imagined pumpkin.

The following chapter will show how the party progressed.

CHAPTER 41

*Jia Bao-yu tastes some superior tea at **Green** Bower Hermitage*
And Grannie Liu samples the sleeping accommodation at
***Green** Delights*

‘THIS flower will to a pumpkin grow.’

As Granule Liu of the flower-studded hair said this, gesturing with her hands to suggest the size of the full-grown pump-kin, a shout of laughter rose from all those present.

She drank the ‘pass’ cup.

‘To be truthful,’ she said, aiming for another laugh, ‘I’m but a clumsy body at the best of times, and having drunk so much, I’m scared of breaking this pretty cup you’ve given me. You should have given me a wooden one; then if I dropped it, it wouldn’t matter.’

The others laughed; but xi-feng pretended to take her seriously:

‘If you really want a wooden cup to drink out of’ I can find you one. But I’d better warn you. The wooden ones aren’t like these porcelain ones; they come in sets of different sizes, and if we get them out for you, you’ll have to drink out of every one in the set.’

Granule Liu calculated.

‘I was only joking,’ she thought. ‘I didn’t think they’d *really* have any. When I’ve dined with the gentry back home, I’ve seen many a gold and silver cup in their houses, but never a wooden one. I expect these will be wooden bowls that the children use. It’s a trick to make me drink a lot. Well, never mind. This stuff’s not much more than sugared water anyway. It can do me no harm if I drink a bit extra.’

Having so reflected, she made reply

‘Very well. Let’s see them first though.’

‘Go to the inner room of the front apartment,’ Xi-feng told Felicity, ‘and fetch me that set of ten winecups on the bookcase—the ones carved Out of bamboo root.’

But before Felicity could go on her errand, Faithful made a counter-proposal:

‘I know that set of yours they’re not very big cups, and in any case, you promised her wooden ones and yours are only made of bamboo. Much better give her ten boxwood ones and make her drink out of *Them.’*

‘All right,’ said Xi-feng. ‘Better still.’ So Faithful sent someone to fetch them.

The sight of these cups when they arrived both alarmed and delighted Grannie Liu. What alarmed her was their size. The largest was as big as a small hand-basin and even the smallest one was twice as big as the cup she held in her hand. What delighted her was the consummate artistry of the carving. On each of the ten cups, in smaller and smaller replicas, was the same landscape with little trees and human figures in it and even some lines of minute ‘grass character’ writing and a tiny carved representation of an artist’s seal.

‘I’ll take the smallest one,’ she said hurriedly.

‘Oh no!’ said Xi-feng, smiling. ‘These cups have never been used before, because up to now we’ve never found anyone with a big enough capacity to drink from them. Now that you’ve asked for them and we’ve been to the trouble of getting them out for you, we must insist on your drinking from every one of them.’

‘I couldn’t,’ said Grannie Lin in a panic. ‘Please, Mrs Lian, don’t make me!’

Grandmother Jia, Aunt Xue and Lady Wang all realized that a person of Grannie Liu’s advanced years could not p05sibly be expected to imbibe so huge a quantity of liquor without the direst consequences, and laughingly pleaded for her.

‘Come now, a joke is a joke. You mustn’t make her drink too much. Let her just drink from the largest one.’

‘Holy name!’ said Grannie Liu. ‘Can’t I just drink from the smallest one, like I said? I can take the largest one home with me and drink it up by degrees.’

The others laughed. Faithful, obliged to relent, ordered one of the larger, but not the largest cup to be filled, and Grannie Liu, holding it in both her hands, began to drink.

‘Drink it slowly, now,’ Grandmother Jia and Aunt Xue counselled her. ‘Don’t make yourself choke.’

Aunt Xue told Xi-feng to offer the old woman something to eat with her bowlful.

‘What would you like, Grannie ?’ said Xi-feng. Just name it and I’ll feed you some.’

‘I don’t know the names of any of these dishes,’ said Grannie Lin. ‘Anything you like. They all taste good to me.’

‘Give her some of the dried aubergine,’ said Grandmother Jia.

Xi-feng collected some between her chopsticks and held it up to Grannie Liu’s mouth.

‘There. I expect at home you eat aubergines every day. Try some of ours and see what you think of it.’

‘You’re having me on,’ said Grannie Liu, when she had eaten the proffered mouthful. ‘No aubergine ever had a flavour like that. If it did, we’d give up growing other crops and grow nothing but aubergines !’

‘It really is aubergine,’ the others laughingly assured her. ‘This time we’re *not* having you on.’

‘Really ?’ said Grannie Liu in some surprise. ‘Well, I couldn’t have had my mind on it properly while I was

eating it. Give me a bit more, Mrs Lian, and this time I'll chew it more carefully.'

Xi-feng took up some more from the dish in her chopsticks and popped it into Grannie Liu's mouth. After prolonged, reflective mastication Granule Liu agreed that there was indeed a slight hint of aubergine in the flavour.

'But I still say this isn't really like aubergine,' she said. 'Tell me the recipe, so that I can make it for myself.'

'It's simple,' said Xi-feng. 'You pick the aubergines in the fourth or fifth month when they're just ripe, skin them, remove the pulp and pips and cut into thread-fine strips which you dry in the sun. Then you take the stock from one whole fat boiling-fowl, put the dried aubergine-strips into a steamer and steam them over the chicken stock until it's nearly all boiled away. Then you take them out and dry them in the sun again. You do that, steaming and drying, steaming and drying by turns, altogether nine times. And it has to be dried until it's quite brittle. Then you store in a tightly-sealed jar, and when you want to eat some, you take out about a saucerful and mix it with fried slivers of chicken leg-meat before serving.'

Xi-feng's 'simple recipe' caused Grannie Liu to stick her tongue Out and shake her head in wonderment.

'Lord Buddha!' she exclaimed. 'That's ten chicken gone into the making of it. No wonder it tastes so good!'

And having laughed a while over the recipe, she applied herself once more to the wine and slowly drank it down. She continued to toy with the cup after she had finished drinking, as though loth to put it down.

'I do believe you haven't had enough,' said Xi-feng. 'Have another cupful.'

'Gracious goodness, that would be the death of me!' said Grannie Liu. 'No, I was just admiring the carving on it. Beautiful. How could they do it so fine?'

'Now that you've finished drinking from it,' said Faithful, 'why not tell us what wood it's made of?'

'Ah now, that question doesn't surprise me,' said Grannie Liu. You young ladies living in the lap of luxury wouldn't know much about wood; but people like us that live all our lives with the woods for neighbours, that lie on wood when we re tired and sit on it when we're weary and even have to eat it sometimes in years of famine: seeing it and hearing it and talking about it every day of our lives, we naturally get to know its different qualities and can tell the genuine from the imitation. Well now, let me see.'

She turned the cup round a good while in her hands and contemplated it with great attention before pronouncing:

'A household like yours wouldn't have anything cheap in it,' she said, 'so anything wooden you've got would be made from a wood that's not very easy to come by. And this is a heavy wood, so it's definitely not willow. I should say, without much doubt, this is **red** pine.'

The loud laughter which greeted this pronouncement was interrupted by the arrival of an old woman who reported to Grandmother Jia that the young actresses were in the Lotus Pavilion awaiting instructions. Were they to perform now, or should they go on waiting a little longer?

'Bless me! I had completely forgotten about them,' said Grandmother Jia. 'Yes, tell them to begin straight away.'

The old woman departed, and presently, in the cold, clear air of autumn, the ululation of flutes rising above a drone of pipes and organs came stealing through the trees and across the water, ravishing the hearts and minds of those who heard it.

Bao-yu, the first to be affected, seized his wine-kettle, poured himself a cupful of wine, and drained it in a single gulp. He then poured himself a second cup; but just as he was about to drink it, he noticed that his mother had evidently been affected in the same way, for she was just at that moment giving orders to a servant to fetch

her a supply of freshly-heated wine. At once he crossed over to where she was sitting and held his cup to her mouth for her to drink from.

Soon the newly-heated wine arrived and Bao-yu went back to his seat. Lady Wang rose from hers and picked up the wine-kettle that had just been brought, intending to pour some for Grandmother Jia. This was a signal for the others present, including Aunt Xue, to rise from their seats as well; but Grandmother Jia hurriedly gave orders for Li Wan and Xi-feng to take over.

'Let your Aunt sit down, so that the others can be at their ease,' she said to Xi-feng, whereupon Lady Wang relinquished the wine-kettle and went back to her seat.

'We're having such fun today,' said Grandmother Jia when Xi-feng had poured for her. '*All* of you must drink!'

She raised her cup to Aunt Xue, then, reaching beyond her, to Xiang-yun and Bao-chai.

'Come on, you two! You must have a cup too. And your Cousin Lin - we're not letting *her* off. I know she can't drink very much, but today is an exception.'

She drained her cup, and xiang-yun, Bao-chai and Dai-yu drank something from theirs.

Grannie Liu, meanwhile, who had seldom before heard such fine music and was more than a little drunk, was showing bet appreciation of it with vigorous movements of hands and feet. Bao-yu, catching sight of her, slipped from his seat to whisper in Dai-yu's ear.

'Look at the old grannie!'

'It reminds me of the passage in the *History Classic* about the animals dancing to the music of Shun,' said Dai-yu. 'Only in this case it's just one old cow!'

The other girls, overhearing this, all laughed.

After a little while the music stopped and Aunt Xue suggested that as everyone appeared to have had about as much to drink as was good for them, perhaps it would be a good idea to break up and walk around for a bit. At this Grandmother Jia, who was herself beginning to feel like some exercise, rose to her feet. The others rose too and followed her outside.

Anxious to keep Grannie Liu with her as a source of diversion, Grandmother Jia took her by the hand to walk with her among the trees at the foot of the rockery. She spent a goodish while circumambulating this area with her, explaining what the various trees, rocks and flowers were called. Grannie Liu listened very attentively.

'Seems that in the city it isn't only the folks that are grander,' she remarked. 'The creatures too seem to be grander than what they are outside. Even the birds here are prettier, and they can talk.'

'What birds?' they asked her, curious.

'I know the one on the golden perch on the verandah—him with the **green** feathers and **red** beak is—a polly parrot,' she said defensively, 'but that old black crow in the cage he's grown a thingummy on his head and learned to talk, as well.'

The 'crow' that she was referring to was a mynah. The others laughed at her mistake.

A little after this some maids came up and invited them to take a snack.

'After drinking all that wine, I don't feel hungry,' said Grandmother Jia. 'Still, bring it here anyway, and those who want to can help themselves.'

The maids went off and returned carrying two small tables. A couple of food-boxes followed. Each, when its cover was removed, was found to contain two different kinds of delicacy. In the first box there were two kinds of steamed things: marzipan cakes made of ground lotus-root and sugared cassia-flowers, and pine-nut and goose-fat rolls, The second box contained two sorts of fried things, one of them a heap of tiny *jiao-zi* only about

one inch long

'What have they got inside them?' Grandmother Jia asked.

'Crab-meat, said one of the old women who had brought the boxes.

Grandmother Jia frowned.

'I shouldn't think anyone would feel like eating that *now,*' she said. 'Much too rich.'

The other type of fried confection consisted of a wide variety of little pastry-shapes deep-fried in butter. These, too, met with the old lady's disapproval. She invited Aunt Xue to choose first. Aunt Xue selected one of the little cakes of lotus-root marzipan. Grandmother Jia chose a goose-fat and pine-nut roll, but after merely tasting it, handed the uneaten half to a maid.

Grannie Liu was fascinated by the delicately fashioned pastries. They had been looped or perforated or criss-crossed in every conceivable shape and the soft dough instantaneously hardened in boiling butter-fat. The one she had selected was shaped like a peony.

'The cleverest girl in our village couldn't make a paper cutout as fine as that,' she said, holding it up for the others to see. 'It seems almost a shame to eat it. I'd like to wrap up a few of these and take them home with me to use as patterns!'

The others laughed.

'I'll give you a jarful to take back with you when you go,' said Grandmother Jia. 'Eat these ones now, while they're still hot.'

The others contented themselves with nibbling only one or two of whichever delicacies in the boxes took their fancy, but Grannie Liu and Ban-er, partly because of the novelty (neither of them having eaten such things before), and partly because the little pastry-shapes really were very pretty and, being heaped promiscuously together, tempted you to go on eating them to discover what new shapes were lying underneath, went on munching away until they had tried several of every shape, by which time about half the pile had vanished. Xi-feng had what was left on the four dishes heaped together onto two of them and put into a single box, and sent it over to the Lotus Pavilion for Élégante and the eleven other little actresses to eat.

> Just then the nurse appeared carrying Xi-feng's little girl, who at once became the main focus of their attention. She was clutching a large grapefruit, but as soon as she caught sight of the Buddha's hand that Ban-er was holding, she decided that she wanted *that*, and let up a wail when the maids who were attempting to coax it from Ban-er could not procure it for her quickly enough. A resourceful cousin saved the situation by hurriedly taking the grapefruit and inducing Ban-er to make an exchange. Ban-er had by this time been playing with the Buddha's hand for quite a long while and had more or less exhausted its possibilities; moreover at the moment he had his hands full of fried pastry-shapes; and the grapefruit not only smelled good but, being round, made an excellent football. For these three reasons he concluded that it was an altogether more satisfactory fruit than the Buddha's hand and abandoned all interest in the latter.

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When everyone had taken tea, Grandmother Jia, with the rest of the party following, conducted Grannie Lin to **Green** Bower Hermitage, where they were met at the gate by the nun Adamantina. Inside the courtyard the trees and shrubs had a thriving, well-cared-for look.

'Monks and nuns always have the best-kept gardens,' said Grandmother Jia, in smiling approval of what she

saw. ‘They have nothing else to do with their time.’

They were walking towards the meditation hall on the east side of the courtyard. As they seemed to hesitate in the outer foyer, Adamantina invited them to go on inside, but Grandmother Jia declined.

‘No, we won’t go inside just now. We’ve all recently taken wine and meat, and as you’ve got the Bodhisattva in there, it would be sacrilege. We can sit out here, where we are. Bring us some of your nice tea. We’ll just drink one cup and then go out again.’

Adamantina hurried off to make tea.

Having heard a good deal about her, Bao-yu studied her very attentively, when she arrived back presently with the tray. It was a little cinque-lobed lacquer tea-tray decorated with a gold-infilled engraving of a cloud dragon coiled round the character for ‘longevity’. On it stood a little covered teacup of Cheng Hua enamelled porcelain. Holding the tray out respectfully in both her hands, she offered the cup to Grandmother Jia.

‘I don’t drink Lu-an tea,’ said Grandmother Jia.

‘I know you don’t,’ said Adainantina with a smile. ‘This is Old Man’s Eyebrows.’

Grandmother Jia took the tea and inquired what sort of water it had been made with.

‘Last year’s rain-water,’ said Adamantina.

After drinking half’ Grandmother Jia handed the cup to Grannie Liu.

‘Try it,’ she said. ‘See what you think of it.’

Grannie Liu gulped down the remaining half.

‘Hmn. All right. A bit on the weak side, though. It would be better if it were brewed a little longer.’

Grandmother Jia and the rest seemed to derive much amusement from these comments.

The others were now served tea in covered cups of ‘sweet-white’ eggshell china—all, that is, except Bao-chai and Dai-yu, whom Adamantina tugged by the sleeve as an indication that they should follow her inside. Bao-yu stealthily slipped out after them and saw Adamantina usher them into a side-room leading off the foyer. This was Adamantina’s own room. Inside it Bao-chai seated herself on the couch and Dai-yu sat on Adamantina’s meditation mat. Adamantina busied herself at the stove, fanning the charcoal until the water was boiling vigorously and brewing them a fresh pot of tea. Bao-yu stepped softly into the room and made his presence known to the two cousins.

‘So you get the hostess’s special brew?’

‘Yes,’ they said laughing. ‘And it’s no good your gate-crashing in here after us, because there’s none for you.’

Just as Adamantina was about to fetch cups for the girls, an old lay-sister appeared at the door carrying the empties she had been collecting in the foyer.

‘Don’t bring that Cheng Hua cup in here,’ said Adamantina. ‘Leave it outside.’

Bao-yu understood immediately. It was because Grannie Liu had drunk from it. In Adamantina’s eyes the cup was now contaminated. He watched her as she got cups out for the girls. One of them, a cup with a handle, had

THE PUMPKIN CUP

carved in *li-shu* characters on one side and

Wang Kai his Treasure

in little autograph characters. on the back, followed by another column of tiny characters:

Examined by Su Dong-po in the Inner Treasury
Fourth month Yuan-feng era anno 5^0

When she had poured tea into this cup she handed it to Bao-chai.

The other cup was shaped like a miniature begging-bowl and was inscribed with the words

THE HORN LINK GOBLET

in 'pearl-drop' seal script. Adamantina filled it and handed it to Dai-yu.

She poured tea for Bao-yu in the **green** jade mug that she normally drank from herself, Bao-yu commented jokingly on the choice:

'I thought you religious were supposed to treat all earthly creatures alike. How comes it that the other two get priceless heirlooms to drink out of but I only get a common old thing like this?'

'I have no wish to boast,' said Adamantina, 'but this "common old thing" as you call it may well be more valuable than anything you could find in your own household.'

'In the world's eyes, yes,' said Bao-yu. 'But "other countries, other ways", you know. When I enter your domain, I naturally adopt your standards and look on gold, jewels and jade as common, vulgar things.'

Adamantina glowed with pleasure. In place of the jade mug she hunted out a large drinking-bowl for him to drink out of. It was carved from a gnarled and ancient bamboo root in the likeness of a coiled-up dragon with horns like antlers.

'There, that's the only thing I've got left. Do you think you can drink so much?'

Delightedly he assured her that he could.

'Yes, I dare say you could too,' said Adamantina. 'But I'm not sure that I'm prepared to waste so much of my best tea on you. You know what they say "One cup for a connoisseur, two for a rustic, and three for a thirsty mule". What sort of creature does that make you if you drink this bowlful?'

Bao-chai, Dai-yu and Bao-yu all three laughed at this. Adamantina poured the equivalent of about a cupful into the bamboo-root bowl. Savouring it carefully in little sips, Bao-yu found it of incomparable freshness and lightness and praised it enthusiastically.

'You realize, of course,' said Adamantina seriously, 'that it is only because of the other two that you are drinking this. If you had come here alone, I should not have given you any.

Bao-yu laughed.

'I fully realize that, and I don't feel in the least indebted to you. I shall offer my thanks to them.'

Adamantina pondered this statement with unsmiling gravity.

'Yes. I think that would be sensible.'

'Is this tea made with last year's rain-water too?' Dai-yu asked her.

Adamantina looked scornful.

'Oh! can you *really* not tell the difference? I am quite disappointed in you. This is melted snow that I collected from the branches of winter-flowering plum-trees five years ago, when I was living at the Coiled Incense temple on Mt Xuan-mu. I managed to fill the whole of that demon-**green** glaze water-jar with it. For

years I couldn't bring myself to start it; then this summer I opened it for the first time Today is only the second time I have ever used any. I am mod surprised that you cannot tell the difference. When did stored rain-water have such buoyant lightness? How could one *possibly* use it for a tea like this?'

Dai-yu was too well aware of Adamantina's eccentricity to attempt a reply; and since it felt awkward to sit there saying nothing, she signalled to Bao-chai that they should go. While the three of them were leaving, Bao-yu stopped to have a word with Adamantina.

'That cup that the old woman drank out of: of course, I realize that you can't possibly use it any more, but it seems a shame to throw it on one side. Couldn't you give it to the old woman? She's very poor, and if she sold it, she could probably live for quite a long while on the proceeds. What do you think?'

Adamantina reflected for some moments and then nodded.

Yes, I suppose so. Fortunately I have never drunk out of that cup myself. If I *had,* I should have smashed it to pieces rather than give it to her. If you want her to have it, though, you must give it to her yourself. I will have no part in it. And you must take it away immediately.'

'But of course,' said Bao-yu. 'No one would expect you to *speak* to her. That would be an even greater pollution. Just give the cup to me and I shall see to the rest.'

Adamantina ordered the cup to be brought in and handed over to Bao-yu. As he took it, Bao-yu said

'After we've gone, shall I get my boys to bring a few buckets of water from the lake and clean the floor for you ?'

Adamantina smiled graciously.

'That would be very nice. But tell them to bring the water only as far as the gate. They can leave it there at the foot of the outer wall. Tell them not to come inside.'

'Of course,' said Bao$_1$u, putting the cup into his sleeve as they went into the foyer. He found a junior maid of Grandmother Jia's there and entrusted it to her.

'When Grannie Liu goes, see that she takes this Cup with her, will you?'

By the time he had done this, Grandmother Jia was already outside in the courtyard expressing a desire to get back. Adamantina made no serious effort to detain her, and after seeing her guests out of the Hermitage, went in again and closed the gate after her.

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Back at the scene of the party, Grandmother Jia, who was feeling somewhat exhausted, told Lady Wang and the girls to act as hostesses to Aunt Xue while she herself went off to Sweet-rice Village for a rest. Xi-feng ordered the servants to fetch a little bamboo carrying-chair, which Grandmother Jia got into. Two old women lifted it up, and then off they all went, Xi-feng and Li Wan one on either side of it and a little cohort of maids and older servants bringing up the rear.

As soon as Grandmother Jia had gone, Aunt Xue excused herself and left, Lady Wang, having dismissed the young actresses and given orders for the left-over food in the lacquer boxes to be distributed among the maids, also availed herself of the opportunity of taking a rest. Putting her feet up on the couch lately occupied by Grandmother Jia, she first caused the blinds to be let down, then, instructing one of the junior maids to massage her legs, and murmuring something about 'calling her if anyone came from Her Old Ladyship', she settled her-self down for a nap.

Bao-yu and the girls watched the maids take the food-boxes out onto the rockery. Some sat there on the

rocks for their picnic; others spread out over the grass below or sat under the trees or down at the water's edge. Although so dispersed, they managed to create a considerable hubbub.

After a little while Faithful arrived with instructions to show Grannie Liu some more of the Garden. The cousins, hoping for more laughs, went along with them.

A short walk took them to the monumental stone arch at the entrance to the Reunion Palace.

'Goodness me!' said the old woman. 'You even have a temple here!'

She fell down on her knees and kotowed, causing her young companions to double up with laughter.

'Why do you laugh?' she said. 'Do you think I don't know what the words say? We have quite a few temples where I come from and they all have arches like this. The writing on the arch is the name of the temple.'

'All right. What's the name of *this* temple then?' they asked her.

Grannie Liu pointed upwards at the characters inscribed overhead.

'"Temple of the Jade Emperor". That's what it says, doesn't it?'

This produced an ecstasy of merriment in the young people. No doubt they would have gone on teasing her, but just at that moment there was an alarming rumble from her bowels and she clutched the hand of one of the little maidservants standing by and begged her for the favour of a couple of sheets of paper, while with the other hand she began undoing the buttons of her dress.

The others, still laughing, shouted at her to stop

'No, no! Not here! Not here!'

They told one of the older women to escort her to a place beyond the north-east corner of the precincts where there was a privy. Having led Grannie Liu to within sight of it and pointed it out to her, the old servant deemed this an excellent opportunity of taking some time off, and went away, leaving Grannie Liu to make her way back alone.

Now Grannie Liu had drunk quantities of **yellow** rice-wine, which did not in fact agree with her; on top of that she had eaten a lot of rich, fatty food; and as the food had made her thirsty, she had concluded by drinking an excessive amount of tea. The upset stomach which was the inevitable consequence of so much indulgence kept her a wearisome long time in the privy before her business there was completed.

> When she at last emerged, the colder air outside drove the wine fumes up into her head, increasing the dizziness, which might be thought normal in a woman of her years who has suddenly got up after squatting for a long time on her heels, to such an extent that she was quite Unable to make out the route that she had come by. Everywhere she looked there were buildings, rocks and trees. Unable to decide which of them lay in the right direction, she made for the nearest paved path and, with slow and deliberate steps, followed it to see where it would take her.

It took her in time to the courtyard wall of a house, but she could find no gate in it, and after wandering round a long while looking for one, she came upon a bamboo trellis, which she contemplated with some astonishment.

'Hmn. Bean-sticks. What are they doing here?'

The 'bean-sticks' resolved themselves into a rose-covered pergola. After walking alongside it for a while, she came to a round 'moon-gate', which she entered. Ahead of her was a channel of crystal-clear water, five or six feet wide. Its banks were reinforced with stone, and a large, flat slab of white stone had been laid across it to make a bridge. After she had crossed the bridge there was a raised cobbled path which, after a couple of right-angled bends, brought her up to the door of the house.

The first thing she saw on entering it was a young woman smiling at her in welcome. Grannie Liu smiled back.

'I'm lost, miss. The young ladies have left me to find my own way and I've wandered in here by mistake.'

Surprised that the girl did not reply, Grannie Thu stepped forward to take her hand and—*bang!*—hit her head a most painful thump on the wooden wall. The girl was a painting, as she found on closer inspection.

'Strange!' she thought. 'How can they paint a picture so that it sticks out like that?'

Grannie Liu was ignorant of the foreign mode of light-and-shadow painting and was sorely puzzled to discover, on touching the picture, that it did not in fact 'stick out' but was flat all over. Turning from it with a sigh and a shake of her head, she moved on to a little doorway in the wooden partition-wall, over which hung a **green,** flower-patterned portière. She raised the portiere and went inside.

> In the room she now entered everything, from the top of the surrounding walls, delicately incised with shapes of swords, vases, musical instruments, incense-burners and the like, to the lavish furnishing below, in which
>
> The weaver's glowing art combined
> With gleam of gold and. orient pearl,

and thence down to the very floor of brilliantly patterned **green** glazed tiles beneath her feet, was such as to make even more dazzled the eyes of an already intoxicated old woman.

She looked for the way out - but where was it? To the left of her there was a bookcase, to the right a screen. She tried behind the screen. Ah, yes! There was the door. But there too, to her intense surprise, approaching her from the opposite direction and causing her a momentary palpitation of the heart, was another old woman, whom she took to be her old gossip from the village.

'What? are you here too?' she asked her, 'I suppose you were wondering what had become of me these last few days. Well, it was neighbourly to come and look for me. Which of the young women brought you in?'

She noticed, with much amusement, that her old neighbour's head was covered all over with flowers.

'Hoo! You'll catch it! Picking the flowers from their garden to put in your own hair. Well I never!'

The other merely grinned back at her and said nothing. Grannie Liu stretched out a hand to give her the touch of shame. The other old woman stretched her hand out too to stop her. After a. brief' soundless skirmish, Grannie Liu managed to get her finger onto the other one's face. But no sooner had she done so than she recoiled in horror, for the cheek she touched was as cold and hard as a block of ice. Suddenly the truth dawned on her:

'I've heard of rich folks having what they call "dressing mirrors 'in their houses. Mayhap I'm standing in front of one of them and it's myself I'm looking at.'

She stretched out her hand again to feel and closely examined the surface. Yes, no doubt of it: it was a mirror, let into the carved surface of the wooden partition. She laughed at her own error.

'Yes, but how do I get out of here?' she thought, as she continued to finger the mirror's carved surround.

Suddenly there was a loud clunk! which so frightened the old woman that for some moments she rolled her eyes in terror. The mirror mirror in fact a kind of door. It had a West Ocean mechanism by which it could be opened or closed, and Grannie Liu, in feeling around it, had accidentally touched the spring which had made the mirror slide back into the panelling, revealing the doorway underneath.

Pleasantly surprised, she passed through the doorway into a room whose main feature was a rich and elegantly patterned bed. Now Grannie Liu was seven or eight parts drunk and thoroughly worn out from all her

walking. Seeing a bed in front of her, she sat down on it gratefully, to rest her feet. But though she intended no more than a few moments' rest, as soon as she had sat down, her weariness overcame her. Her head went down and her feet went up as though she was no longer in possession of them; a darkness closed over her eyes, and she sank back on the bed, fast asleep.

Outside in the Garden meanwhile, the cousins were beginning to wonder what had become of her, and Ban-er, missing his grandmother, became panicky and began to cry.

'Perhaps she's fallen into the privy,' one of the young people suggested cheerfully. 'We'd better send someone to have a look.'

Two old women were sent to the privy to investigate. When they reported back 'hat she was not there, the others were at a loss to think where she could have got to. It was Aroma who hit on the correct hypothesis.

'She must have missed the way back because she was drunk. If she followed the path in the wrong direction, it will have taken her to our back Courtyard. Now if she went through the pergola and then on into the house through the back door, she'll probably have been seen by one of the maids. If she *didn't* go in through the pergola but went on walking in a south-westerly direction, Heaven only knows where she'll end up! I think I'd better go and have a look.

She hurried back to **Green** Delights, intending to ask the junior maids if they had seen her; but the place was deserted; they had all sneaked off elsewhere to play. Entering the main building by way of the front door, she made her way through the complicated carved partition. A thunderous snoring could be heard coming from the bedroom at the back. She hurried through. As she entered the bedroom, a heavy stink, compounded of farts and wine-fumes, assailed her nostrils. Her eyes travelled to the bed, from which the sounds were coming, and saw Grannie Liu, spreadeagled on her back and fast asleep.

As soon as she had overcome her shock, she rushed up to the bed and shook her relentlessly until she woke. Grannie Liu opened her eyes wide and saw Aroma standing over her.

'Oh, miss!' She scrambled hurriedly to her feet. C Oh, I am sorry! Anyway—praise be!— I haven't dirtied the bed.'

She felt it nervously, to make sure.

Aroma, mortally afraid that someone would overhear and Bao-yu get to know of what had happened, gestured to her violently not to speak. Hurriedly she threw three or four whole handfuls of Hundred Blend aromatic onto the incense burner that stood always smouldering beside the bed and replaced its cover.

'At least it's a mercy she wasn't sick,' she thought to herself.

Speaking to her in an urgent whisper, she nevertheless contrived to smile at her reassuringly:

'It's all right. I'll look after this. Just follow me.'

Grannie Liu nodded gratefully and followed her to the junior maids' quarters outside, where Aroma made her sit down.

'If they ask what happened, just say that you passed Out and had a little nap on the rockery.'

Grannie Liu willingly agreed, and Aroma gave her some tea. By the end of the second cup she had sobered up completely and was able to converse.

'Which of the young ladies does the bedroom belong to?' she asked Aroma. 'It's the most beautiful I ever saw. I thought I was in paradise.'

Aroma gave a wry little smile.

'It's—actually it's Master Bao's bedroom.'

Grannie Liu fell silent, horrified by the enormity of her trespass. Seeing that she had now recovered, Aroma led her out through the front courtyard and back to where the others were waiting.

'I found her asleep on the grass,' she said when she saw them, 'so I've brought her back for you.'

The others seemed satisfied with this explanation, for no further mention was made of it.

Shortly after this Grandmother Jia woke up and dinner was laid for her in Sweet-rice Village; but she felt too exhausted to eat anything, and getting into the bamboo carrying-chair again, had herself carried back to her own apartment to rest. When she was back, she told Xi-feng and the rest of the young folk who had escorted her to go and have their dinner, and the cousins went back into the Garden

Ensuing events will be dealt with in the following Chapter.

CHAPTER 42

Lady Allspice wins over a suspicious nature with some well-intentioned advice
And River Queen enhances her reputation as a wit with some amusing sarcasms

The last chapter showed how Grandmother Jia, escorted by all the others, returned from Sweet-rice Village to her own apartment. As soon as she arrived, she insisted that the young people should go off and have their dinner. The young people accordingly went back into the Garden, and when they had eaten, the party finally broke up.

Returning from the Garden with little Ban-er, Granule Liu first called on xi4eng to announce her intention of leaving for home early next morning.

'We've only been here two or three days,' she said, 'but in these two or three days we've seen and heard and eaten and drunk more things than we ever dreamed of. I'm truly grateful to you and Her Old Ladyship and the young gentlewomen and the young ladies working in the different apartments for treating an old countrywoman with so much kindness. I don't know what I can do in return. All I can think of is to buy some sticks of best incense when I get back so that I can offer some every day to the Lord Buddha and pray him to give you long life. Leastways it would show my gratitude.'

'It's a bit early yet for rejoicing,' said Xi-feng drily. 'Thanks to you, Her Old Ladyship seems to have caught a chill and is at this very moment lying on her back complaining how bad she feels; and my little girl has caught a cold, too, and is lying in there with a fever.'

Granule Liu murmured sympathetically.

'Her Old Ladyship's feeling her age, poor soul,' she said. And she isn't used to the exercise.'

'I've never seen her more lively than she was today,' said Xi-feng. 'Generally when she goes into the Garden, she'll visit just one or two places, sit there for a little while, and then come back again. But today, because you were there and she wanted to show you everything, she must have covered the greater part of the Garden. It was also because of you that I wasn't on hand when Lady Wang gave my little girl that piece of cake. I'm sure it was eating out in the cold that has made her feverish.'

'I suppose your little lass doesn't go into the Garden very much,' said Grannie Liu. 'Not like *our* young ones,

off to play in the grave-garths almost as soon as they can walk. She may have caught a cold from the wind as you say. On the other hand, children of her age, being pure of body, often have the second sight. It *could* have been brought on by seeing a spirit. If I was you, I'd have a look in the Almanac, just in case. You never know, the child might have been pixified.'

Wondering why she had not thought of this herself, xi-feng at once ordered Patience to fetch down the *Jade Casket.* Sunshine was summoned to look up the relevant passage and read it out to them. This, after some preliminary hunting, he proceeded to do:

> EIGHTH MONTH. TWENTY-FIFTH DAY: Sicknesses Occurring on this day have a south-easterly origin. *Possible cause* Encounter with spirit of hanged person or flower spirit. *Recommended action* Maximum benefit may be obtained by procuring voluntary departure of spirit. To do this, take forty pieces of coloured paper spirit money' and walk forty paces in a south-easterly direction offering one of the pieces at every step.

'There you are!' said Xi-feng. 'That *must* be it. The Garden is just where you'd *expect* to run into a flower spirit. I wouldn't be a bit surprised if that doesn't account for Her Old Ladyship's trouble as well.'

She sent someone forthwith to obtain two lots of spirit money and got two of the servants to carry out the exorcism, one on Grandmother Jia's behalf and the other on behalf of her little girl. As soon as it was over, she and Grannie Liu went in to see how Baby was getting on. They found her sleeping peacefully.

'There!' said Xi-feng delightedly. 'It takes an old, experienced person like yourself to know these things. Perhaps you could also tell me why she's such a sickly little girl. She's always going down with something or other.'

'There's nothing unusual about that,' said Granule Liu. 'Children of well-to-do folks are brought up so delicate, their bodies can't stand any hardship. And for another thing, when young folks are cherished too much, it overloads their luck. It might be better for her if in future you tried not to make quite so much of her.'

'You may be right,' said Xi-feng without much conviction. 'It's just occurred to me: as we haven't named the child yet, I wonder if you'd like to name her for us? For one thing, being named by someone so old will help her to live longer; and for another—I hope you won t mind my saying this, but you country people do have quite a lot of poverty and hardship to contend with—being named by a poor person like yourself may help to balance her luck.'

Granule Liu thought for a bit.

'When was she born?'

'Ah, that's just the trouble,' said Xi-feng. 'She was born on Qiao-jie—the Seventh of the Seventh—a very unlucky date.'

'No matter,' said Granule Lin. '*Call* her "Qiao-jie" then. That's what the doctors mean when they talk about "fighting poison with poison and fire with fire". You call her "Qiao-jie" like I say, and I guarantee that she'll live to a ripe old age. I prophesy for this child that when she's a big girl and the others are all going off to get married, she may for a time find that things are not going her way; but thanks to this name, all her misfortunes will turn into blessings, and what at first looked like bad luck will turn out to be good luck in the end.'

Xi-feng was of course delighted with these 'auspicious words' and thanked her warmly.

'May it turn out for her as you say!'

She summoned Patience.

‘We’re going to be busy tomorrow and may not have the time then. As you’ve got nothing to do at the moment, why don’t you get the things for Grannie together, so that everything will be ready for her to start first thing tomorrow ?’

‘Please don’t go giving me a lot of things,’ said Grannie Liu. ‘I’ve already put you to so much inconvenience these last few days, I should feel even more uncomfortable carrying a lot of things back with me.’

‘These are only very ordinary things,’ said Xi-feng. ‘Nothing special. Just a few things for you to take back with you and show off to the neighbours. Just so as to be able to say that you’ve been to town.’

‘Come over here, Granule, and have a look,’ said Patience. Granule Lu followed her into the next room. A full half of the kang was occupied by her piled-up presents. Patience picked them up one by one and explained them to her.

‘This sky-**blue** material is the gauze you said you wanted. The pale-**blue** gauze in a closer weave is a present from the Mistress to line it with. These are two lengths of wild-silk pongee. You can use it to make either a dress or a skirt with; it would do equally well for either. In this wrapping here there are two lengths of silk for making up into a New Year outfit. This is a box of various kinds of cakes and pastries made in the Imperial kitchens. There are some kinds that you’ve already eaten and some that you haven’t. You want to put them out on plates when you’re having someone to tea: you’ll find they’re a bit better than the ones you can buy in the shops. These two sacks are the ones you brought the vegetables in when you came. This one has got two bushels of **pink** ‘Emperor’ rice in it. It makes a really delicious congee. This one has got fruit and nuts and other things from the Garden in it. And this packet here has got eight taels of silver in it. Everything up to here is from the Mistress. Now these two packets here have each got fifty taels of silver in them - a hundred taels in all. They’re a present from Her Ladyship, for starting a little business or buying some land with when you get back, so that you can be self-sufficient in future and not have to keep falling back on your friends. The two jackets’—here Patience smiled somewhat embarrassedly—‘the two jackets and the two skirts and the four head-scarves and the packet of embroidery silks are a present from me. The clothes have only been worn a very little but they aren’t new: so if you decide to throw them back at me, I shan’t complain.’

Grannie Liu had been exclaiming rapturously as each item was shown to her and must have uttered several dozen ‘Holy Names’ by the time Patience came to her own gift.

‘Throw them back at you, Miss?’ she said warmly, touched by the maid’s kindness and humility. ‘How can you say such a thing? Fine clothes like these? I shouldn’t know where to buy them if I had the money! You make me feel ashamed. I don’t like to take them off you; yet if I don’t, you will think me ungrateful.’

‘Get away with you!’ said Patience. ‘That sort of talk is for strangers, and you are one of us. If I didn’t think of you so, I’d never have dared make the offer. You just take them and stop worrying. In any case, there’s something I want from you in return. Next New Year, bring us some of your home-dried mixed vegetables: pigweed and cowpeas and kidney beans and dried aubergines and dried gourd-shavings. Everyone here loves them. You just bring us some of them. We don’t want anything else from you, mind, so don’t go wondering what else to bring. Just bring some of them, and we’ll be quits.’

Grannie Liu thanked her warmly and promised to remember the dried vegetables.

‘Now off to bed with you!’ said Patience. ‘I’ll look after this lot for you. You can leave it here tonight, and tomorrow we’ll send the boys out for a cab and get them to load it for you. So you’ve got nothing to worry about.’

Overwhelmed by so much kindness, Grannie Liu went back into the other room to take her leave of Xi-feng, and after thanking her many times over, went off to Grandmother Jia’s apartment to spend the night.

She was up betimes next morning and would like to have said good-bye to Grandmother Jia as soon as she had completed her toilet, and made an early start; but the family forestalled her. Knowing that the old lady was indisposed, they had trooped in first thing to inquire how she was and had already sent outside for a doctor. The latter's arrival at the mansion was shortly after announced by an old woman servant, whereupon the old women in attendance on Grand mother Jia urged her to conceal herself behind the curtains of the summer-bed. But Grandmother Jia refused to budge.

'I'm old, too, woman—old enough to be his mother, I shouldn't wonder. What have I got to fear from him at my age? I'm not going behind any curtains. Let him examine me where I am.'

Seeing that she was resolved to stay, the old women brought up a little table and put a small pillow on it for her to rest her arm on. These preparations completed, they gave orders for the doctor to be admitted.

Dr Wang was shortly to be observed crossing the courtyard below, conducted by Cousin Zhen, Jia Lian and Jia Rong. Modestly declining to walk up the central ramp, he followed Cousin Zhen up the right-hand side steps onto the terrace, where two old women, one on either side of the doorway, were holding up the door-blind in readiness. Bao-yu came forward to welcome the doctor as the two old women were conducting him through the outer room, and led him, still accompanied by the other gentlemen, to his grandmother inside.

The old lady was sitting up very stiffly on a couch. She was wearing a black crepe jacket lined with pearly-haired baby lamb's skin. Four little maids, their hair still done up in childish 'horns', stood two on either side of her, holding fly whisks and spittoons, and five or six old serving-women were fanned out in a sort of bodyguard behind her. Vaguely discernible glimpses of brightly-coloured dresses and golden hair-ornaments betrayed the presence of numerous younger women behind the **green** muslin curtains at the back. Not daring to raise his head in so much female company, Dr Wang advanced and saluted his patient. Observing that he was dressed in the uniform of a mandarin of the sixth rank, Grandmother Jia deduced that he must be a Court Physician, and in returning his salutation was careful to address him with the 'Worshipful' to which his appointment entitled him.

'And what is the Worshipful's name?' she asked Cousin Zhen.

'Wang.'

'When I was a young woman, the President of the Imperial College of Physicians was a Wang,' said Grandmother Jia. 'Wang Jun-xiao. Famous for his diagnoses.'

The doctor bowed.

'He was my great-uncle,' he said, smiling demurely, but still not daring to raise his head.

Grandmother Jia laughed.

'That makes you a friend of the family.'

She stretched out an arm and slowly arranged it for him on the pillow. The old women brought up a large stool which they set down in front of her table and slightly to one side. Dr Wang knelt on it, squatting on his heel with one haunch so that he was half-sitting on the edge of the stool, and in that polite but uncomfortable posture proceeded at great length to take the old lady's pulses, first in one arm and then in the other. After that he made another bow and retired, eyes still on the floor, as they had been throughout the consultation.

'Thank you,' said Grandmother Jia as he was leaving. 'See him out, will you, Zhen? And see that he gets. some tea.'

Murmuring a reply, Cousin Zhen himself withdrew, followed by Jia Lian and Jia Rong, and conducted Dr Wang back to one of the gentlemen's rooms in the front part of the mansion.

'There's nothing seriously wrong with Lady Jia,' said Dr Wang when they were seated. 'She has a slight

chill. There is no need for her to take any medicine. A light, simple diet for a day or two and see that she keeps warm. That should be enough. I'll write Out a prescription that you can have made up if she feels like taking something. If not, I should just forget about it.'

He drank his tea and wrote out the prescription. Just as he was about to leave, the nurse came hurrying in with Xi-feng's little girl in her arms.

'Doctor, have a look at us too, will you?'

The doctor went over, took one of the child's hands and supported it on his own left hand while he felt her pulse. Then he felt her forehead and inspected her tongue.

'I'm afraid the young lady is not going to be very pleased with my advice,' he said with a smile. 'A good, cleansing hunger is what she needs. Let her miss a couple of meals. No need for a prescription. I shall send you some pills that you can dissolve in hot ginger-water and give her to drink at bedtime. That should help do the trick.'

With that he took his leave once more and departed.

Cousin Zhen and the other two went back to Grandmother Jia's apartment with the prescription and reported what the doctor had said. Then they laid the prescription on the table and withdrew.

Lady Wang, Li Wan, Xi-feng, Bao-chai and the rest came out from behind the curtain as soon as the doctor had gone. Lady. Wang sat with Grandmother Jia for a while before returning to her own apartment.

The coast was now at last clear for Grannie Liu to come forward and take her leave.

'You must come again when you have the time,' said Grandmother Jia. She ordered Faithful to see her off. 'I can't see you off myself,' she said. 'I'm not feeling too well today.'

Grannie Liu, having thanked her and said good-bye, followed Faithful out of the room and into a room at the side of the courtyard. Faithful pointed to a large bundle on the kang

'These are dresses given to Her Old Ladyship by various people over the years as birthday or festival presents, but as she refuses to wear any clothes made by outsiders, they've none of them ever been worn. It's a shame to keep them, really. She told me yesterday to pick out a few for you to take back with you, either to give away as presents or to wear yourself about the house. In this box here you'll find those pastries you wanted. This parcel has got the medicines in you were talking about the other day: the **Red** Flower Poison Dispellers, the Old Gold Anti-Fever Pastilles, the Blood Renewing Elixir Pills and the Easy Birth Pills. You'll find each kind wrapped up separately inside its own prescription. These two little silk purses are to wear.' Faithful undid the draw-strings and extracted from each purse a golden 'Heart's Desire' medallion with a device showing an ingot, a writing-brush and a sceptre. She smiled at Grannie Liu mischievously:

'You give *me* these and keep the purses.'

Grannie Liu, surprised and delighted (as she showed by her many pious ejaculations) to be receiving these further presents in addition to what Patience had shown her the night before, seemed eager to accede to this request.

'Yes, yes, Miss. You keep them by all means.'

Faithful, who had not intended to be taken seriously, replaced the medallions in their. purses and did them up again.

'I was only pulling your leg. I've got lots of these things already. Keep them to give the children at New Year.

While she was speaking, a little maid came in carrying a Cheng Hua enamelled porcelain cup, which she handed to Granule Liu.

'Master Bao said I was to give you this.'

'Well!' said Granule Liu as she took the cup from her. 'Now what do you make of that? Reckon it must be something I did for him in a past life.'

'Those clothes I gave you to change into the other day when you had your bath were mine,' said Faithful. 'If you don't mind taking them off me, I've got some more like them that I'd like to make you a present of.'

As Grannie Liu made no objection, Faithful got out several more sets of clothing and wrapped them up for her.

Granule Lin wanted to go into the Garden to thank Bao-yu and the girls and say good-bye to them; she also wanted to take her leave of Lady Wang; but Faithful prevented her.

'It isn't necessary. In any case, they won't be seeing anyone at this hour. I can thank them for you when I see them later. Well, good-bye then. Come again when you can.'

She ordered an old servant-woman to fetch two pages from the inner gate to help Grannie Liu out with her things. The old servant undertook to do this and also went with Grannie Liu to collect the things from Xi-feng's apartment. When they had got them all together, she fetched the boys from the outside corner gate who carried them out to the street for her and loaded them into a waiting cab. Granule Liu and Ban-er then got in themselves and Set off without more ado on their journey back home.

At this point they pass also out of our narrative, which turns now to other matters.

*

After they had eaten their lunch, Bao-chai and the test of the young people called once more on Grandmother Jia, to see how she was progressing. On their way back, as they reached that point in the Garden where their paths separated, Bao-chai called Dai-yu over to her.

'Frowner, come with me. There's something I want to talk to you about.'

Dai-yu followed her to Allspice Court. When they were inside her room, Bao-chai sat down.

'Well?' she said to Dai-yu. 'Aren't you going to kneel down? I am about to interrogate you.'

Dai-yu was mystified.

'Poor Bao-chai!' she said, laughing. 'The girl's gone off her head. Interrogate me about what ?'

'My dear, well-bred young lady!' said Bao-chai. 'My dear, sheltered young innocent! *What* were those things I heard you saying yesterday? Come now, the truth!'

Dai-yu, still mystified, continued to laugh. She was beginning to feel somewhat uneasy, though she would not admit it.

'What awful thing am I supposed to have said? I expect you're making it up, but you may as well tell me.'

'Still acting the innocent?' said Bao-chai. 'What were those things you said yesterday when we were laying that drinking game? I *couldn't* think where you could have got them from.'

Dai-yu cast her mind back and remembered, blushing, that the day before, when stumped for an answer, she had got through her turn by citing passages from *The Return of the Soul* and *The Western Chamber*. She hugged Bao-chai imploringly.

'Dear coz! I really don't know. I just said them without thinking. If you tell me not to, I promise not to say them again.'

'*I* really don't know either,' said Bao-chai. 'I just thought they sounded rather interesting. I thought perhaps you might be able to tell me what they were.'

‘Dear coz! Please don’t tell anyone about this. I promise not to repeat such things again.’

Moved by the **scarlet,** shame-filled face and pitifully entreating voice, Bao-chai relented and did not pursue her questioning. Having first drawn her down into a seat and handed her some tea, she began, very gently, to address her in the following manner:

‘What do you take me for? I’m just as bad. At seven or eight I used to be a real little terror. Ours was reckoned to be rather a literary family. My grandfather was a bibliophile, so the house we lived in was full of books. We were a big family in those days. All my boy cousins and girl cousins on my father’s side lived with us in the same house. All of us younger people hated serious books but liked reading poetry and plays. The boys had got lots and lots of plays: *The Western Chamber, The Lute-player, A Hundred Yuan Plays*—just about everything you could think of. *They* used to read them behind *our* backs, and we girls used to read them behind theirs. Eventually the grown-ups got to know about it and then there were beatings and lectures and burning of books—and that was the end of that.

‘So, you see, in the case of us girls it would probably be better for us if we never learned to read in the first place. Even boys, if they gain no understanding from their reading, would do better not to read at all; and if that is true of boys, it certainly holds good for girls like you and me. The little poetry-writing and calligraphy we indulge in is not really our proper business. Come to that, it isn’t a boy’s proper business either. A boy’s proper business is to read books in order to gain an understanding of things, so that when he grows up he can play his part in governing the country.

‘Not that one hears of that happening much nowadays. Nowadays their reading seems to make them even worse than they were to start with. And unfortunately it isn’t merely a case of their being led astray by what they read. The books, too, are spoiled, by the false interpretations they put upon them. They would do better to leave books alone and take up business or agriculture. At least they wouldn’t do so much damage.

‘As for girls like you and me: spinning and sewing are *our* proper business. What do we need to be able to read for? But since we can read, let us confine ourselves to good, improving books; let us avoid like the plague those pernicious works of fiction, which so undermine the character that in the end it is past reclaiming.’

This lengthy homily had so chastened Dai-yu that she sat with head bowed low over her teacup and, though her heart consented, could only manage a weak little ‘yes’ by way of reply.

At that moment Candida came into the room:

‘Mrs Zhu says will you please come over to discuss an important matter with her? Miss Ying and Miss Tan and Miss Xi and Miss Shi and Master Bao are there already, waiting for you.’

‘I wonder what it is this time,’ said Bao-chai.

‘We shall soon find out if we go,’ said Dai-yu.

So off she went, and Bao-chai with her, to Sweet-rice Village. They found everyone else there, as Candida had said. Li Wan greeted them with a smile.

‘We’ve only just got our poetry club started, and already someone is trying to wriggle out of it. It’s Xi-chun. She’s asking for a year’s leave of absence.’

‘I can guess why that is,’ said Dai-yu. ‘It’s because of what Grandmother said about painting the Garden. She’s decided to use that as an excuse.’

‘I don’t think you should blame Grandmother,’ said Tan-chun. ‘It’s what Grannie Liu said that started it.’

‘Grannie Liu, yes, that’s right,’ Dai-yu hurriedly corrected herself. ‘Whose ‘grannie’ is she anyway, I’d like to know? ‘Old Mother Locust’ we ought to call her, not ‘Grannie Liu’.’

This set them all laughing.

‘If one wants to hear the demotic at its most forceful,’ said Bao-chai, ‘one has to listen to Cousin Feng. Fortunately for us she can’t read, so her jokes are somewhat lacking in finesse and the language she uses can never rise above the level at which it is commonly spoken. The secret of Frowner’s sarcastic tongue is that she uses the method adopted by Confucius when he edited the *Spring and Autumn Anna/s*, that is to say, she extracts the essentials from vulgar speech and polishes and refines them, so that when she uses them to illustrate a point, each word or phrase is given its maximum possible effectiveness. The mere name ‘Old Mother Locust,’, for example, is sufficient to evoke the whole scene of yesterday’s party and everything that happened at it. What’s more, she is able to do this sort of thing almost without thinking.’

The others, still laughing, assured Bao-chai that she excelled as a commentator no less than Dai-yu and Xi-feng, in their different ways, as wits.

‘The reason I asked you all here is because I wanted your advice on how long we *ought* to give her,’ said Li Wan. ‘*I* said a month, but *she* says that’s much too short. What *do you* all think?

‘Logically a year wouldn’t be at all too long,’ said Dai-yu. ‘If it took a whole year to *build* the Garden, she would naturally require about two years in which to *paint* it. First she’s got to grind her ink, then she’s got to soften her brushes, then she’s got to fix the paper, then she’s got to find her colours, and then -,

The others realized that this was a joke at Xi-chun’s expense.

‘Yes?’ they said, playing up to her. ‘What then?’

Dai-yu, unable to maintain a straight face, was beginning to giggle.

‘—and then proceed in like manner, by gradual degrees, to paint it.’

Prolonged hilarity and clapping of hands.

‘In like manner, by gradual degrees’,’ said Bao-chai. ‘I like that. The telling phrase at the end. The trouble with all those jokes we were laughing at yesterday is that they were funny enough at the time, but on recollection they seem rather stupid. Dai-yu’s jokes on the other hand, though the words at first appear colourless, are richly humorous to remember. They certainly make *me* laugh a lot.’

‘You shouldn’t flatter her, Cousin Chai,’ said Xi-chun plaintively. ‘It encourages her to show off. It’s because you complimented her on her joke about Granule Liu that she’s started making fun of *me*.’

‘Tell me now,’ said Dai-yu, taking Xi-chun’s hand in her own, ‘is it to be a picture of the Garden alone, or are *we* to be in it as well?’

‘It was originally to have been of the Garden alone,’ said Xi-chun, ‘but afterwards Grandmother said that that would make it look too much like an architect’s drawing and told me to put in some people. She said what we wanted was something like one of those paintings of ‘Scholars Enjoying Themselves in a Landscape’. The trouble is, I don’t know how to do buildings in the Elaborate style, and I’m no good at human figures; but as I was too scared to refuse, I’ve got myself into a mess.’

‘Human figures are no problem,’ said Dai-yu. ‘It’s the insect-painting that’s going to give you the trouble.’

‘Now you’re talking nonsense,’ said Li Wan. ‘What need will there be of insects in a painting of the Garden? A few animals and birds dotted here and there maybe, but no insects, surely?’

‘If she has no other insects in it, she’s *got* to have Old Mother Locust,’ said Dai-yu. ‘Without her the painting would be incomplete.’

The others all laughed. Dai-yu continued, laughing so much herself that she had to clutch her chest with both hands:

'You must hurry up and get on with the painting. I've already thought of a title to inscribe on it when it's finished. You must call it *'With Locust to the Chew'.'*

The others threw back their heads and roared, Their laughter ended abruptly, however, when a loud crash caused them to look anxiously around them to see what had fallen.

It turned out to have been Xiang-yun's chair. It had been a somewhat rickety one to start with, and in laughing she had thrown herself back against it so violently that the two joints connecting the chairback with the seat had sprung, causing her to sink backwards and sideways, still sitting in the disintegrating chair. Fortunately she was saved by the room's wooden partition from falling onto the floor. The undignified spectacle of her descent provoked fresh shouts of mirth which only gradually subsided when Bao-yu hurried over and helped her to her feet.

As he passed Dai-yu he signalled to her with his eyes. Understanding that something must be wrong with her appearance, she slipped into Li Wan's bedroom and took the cover off the mirror to have a look. It was the hair above her brows that was coming loose. She pulled out the drawer in Li Wan's dressing-box, took out two little vanity-brushes, primmed her hair at the mirror, then, hurriedly replacing everything, went back into the outer room, where the others were still laughing. She pointed a finger accusingly at Li Wan.

'So this is your idea of 'supervision in needlework and moral instruction'—inviting us over here for jokes and horseplay!'

'Did you hear that, all of you?' said Li Wan. 'This is the ringleader who sets everyone else laughing and misbehaving, yet she has the effrontery to blame *me* for starting it all! Oh, I could - ! Well, all I can say is that I hope when you marry you have a real Tartar for a mother-in-law and lots of nasty sisters-in-law with tongues as sharp as yours. It will serve you right!'

Dai-yu, blushing, clung to Bao-chai's hand.

'Let's give her a year's leave, shall we?'

'Let me suggest what I think is a fair compromise and see what the rest of you think of it,' said Bao-chai. 'It's true that Lotus Dweller can paint, but 'painting' in her case means no more than an occasional sketch in the Impressionistic style. Now of course, you couldn't paint this Garden in the first place if you didn't have *impressions* of it; but the trouble is that the Garden itself was designed rather like a painting, with every rock, every tree, every building in it carefully and precisely placed in order to produce a particular scenic effect; and if you tried to get your impressions of all of these different scenes onto paper exactly as they are, they simply wouldn't make a picture. The shape of the paper imposes its own perspectives. You have to make them into a composition. You have to decide which to bring into the foreground and which to push into the background, which to leave out altogether and which to show only in glimpses. When you've done that, you can make your rough draft. And even then, it's only when you've studied the draft for a long time and corrected it until you're satisfied that you can go ahead with your transfer.

'One of your difficulties is going to be the ruler-work. With all those buildings you're going to *have* to do the straight lines with a ruler, and in ruler-work if you're not very careful it's easy to make the most terrible mistakes - railings that slant to one side, leaning pillars, windows on the skew or steps drawn Out of line. Sometimes careless ruling can produce even more

grotesque results, like a table squashed into a wall or a flowerpot apparently testing on the side of a curtain. Any one of these things is enough to make a painting look ridiculous.

'Putting in the human figures is going to be another problem. First of all you have to be very careful that you have got them in the right perspective. Then again, in painting figures the clothes and the position of the hands and feet are of great importance. A careless slip of the brush can mean a monstrously swollen hand or a crippled leg. Compared with these, little mishaps like the colour of the face running into the hair are of minor importance.

'In my opinion this painting is going to be very, very difficult. And since a year is thought to be too long and a month too short, the compromise I suggest is that she should be allowed half a year to do it in, but that Cousin Bao should be appointed to help her. My reason is not that I think he knows mote about painting than she does and can tell her how to do it—I am sure that if he tried, it would only make matters worse—but because whenever there is anything she doesn't know about or has difficulty in putting in, he will be able to take the painting to one or another of his men friends outside who know about these matters and ask for their advice.'

Bao-yu was enthusiastic.

'That's a splendid idea. Zhan Guang can do Elaborate style buildings and Cheng Ri-xing is very good at women. I'll go and have a word with them now.'

'Didn't I tell you you ought to be called 'Busybody'?' said Bao-chai. 'Just because I've mentioned the possibility, you don't have to go rushing off straight away. Wait until we've finished discussing what needs to be done, *then* you can go and see them. The question now is, what is she going to do this painting on?'

'We've got some. Snow Wave paper still,' said Bao-yu. 'It comes in large enough pieces and it holds the ink well.'

'Oh, you're just hopeless I' said Bao-chai. 'Snow Wave is a good, ink-receptive paper for doing calligraphy or Impressionist style paintings on, and it will stand up to the wrinkle-and-wipe work in a Southern School landscape; but it is quite unsuitable for a painting like this one involving detailed colouring and layer upon layer of graded washes. You'd merely ruin the picture and waste the paper.

'Now I'll tell you what to do. Before they started on the construction of this Garden, they made a very detailed drawing of the layout. It was only an artist's impression, but the measurements shown on it were all accurate. Why don't you ask Lady Wang for that drawing and then ask Cousin Feng to give you a piece of heavyweight pongee of the same dimensions? Cousin Bao can get Uncle Zheng's gentlemen to size it for you, and they can make you a draft by adapting the architect's drawing and putting in the human figures. He could even get them to touch in some of the **blue**-and-**green** background for you and indicate where the outlines will need reinforcing with milk gold or milk silver.

'Meanwhile *you* must get hold of a portable stove that you can use for melting and extracting your glue on and for heating the water to wash your brushes with. You'll also need a long distemperer's table, and a blanket to cover it, for resting your painting on. And I don't suppose your present supply of paint-saucers and brushes is likely to be adequate. You'd better start from scratch and get yourself a completely new outfit.'

'I haven't got *any* equipment to speak of,' said Xi-chun. 'I just use my ordinary writing-brushes when I

want to paint. As for colours: **red** ochre, Canton indigo, gamboge and safflower **red** are the only four I've got. Apart from that, all I have is a couple of colouring brushes.'

'Why ever didn't you tell me before?' said Bao-chai. 'I've still got lots of these things. The only thing is, if I give them to you before you actually need them, they will only be lying around doing nothing in your room the same as they now are in *mine*. On second thoughts I think I'll hang on to them for the time being. We can say that I am keeping them for you. But I can let you have any of them you want as soon as the need arises. I'd rather you used my stuff for painting fans with and that sort of thing, though. It would be a waste to use it on this great big painting of the Garden. What I'll do for you now is to make out a list of materials you can ask Lady Jia for. You may not know about some of these things, so perhaps it would be a good idea if Cousin Bao were to take them down at my dictation.'

Bao-yu had brush and ink already prepared. He had been intending in any case to take notes, in order to have his own record of what she said, and had merely to pick up his brush and wait for her to begin.

Here is the list she dictated:

large size raft brushes	4
No.2 size raft brushes	4
No.3 size raft brushes	4
large wash layers	4
medium wash layer	4
small wash layers	4
large Southern crab's claws	10
small Southern crab's claws	10
whisker brushes	10
large colouring brushes	20
small colouring brushes	20
face liners	10
willow-slip brushes	20
arrow-shaped cinnabar	4 oz.
Southern **red** ochre	4 oz.
orpiment	4 oz.
azurite	4 oz.
malachite	4 oz.
brush-stick gamboge	4 oz.
Canton indigo	8 oz.
oyster-shell white	4 boxes
safflower red	10 sheets
red powder-gold	200 leaves
gold foil	200 leaves
quality Canton glue	4 oz.
clear alum	4 oz.

‘That doesn’t allow for the alum and glue that will be needed for the sizing,’ said Bao-chai. ‘You can leave that to the menfolk.

By the time these colours have been washed and ground and emulsified and graded, you should have enough there to last you a lifetime—messing about and practice-work included.’

She continued with her list:

superfine silk strainers	4
coarse silk strainers	2
strainer-brushes	4
mortars, various sizes	4
coarse howls	20
5-in. saucers	10
3 in. porcelain ditto	20
portable stoves	2
casseroles, various sizes	4
new porcelain water-jars	2
new water-buckets	2
1-ft white linen bags	4
light charcoal	20 catties
willow-wood charcoal	1 catty
3-drawer chest of drawers	1
gauze, close-woven	1 ell
raw ginger	2 oz.
soy sauce	1/2 catty

‘—a cooking-pot and a frying-slice,’ Dai-yu added hurriedly.

‘What are *they* for?’ said Bao-chai.

‘To use with the ginger and soy sauce,’ said Dai-yu. ‘Then she’ll be able to cook the colours and eat them.’

The others laughed, including Bao-chai herself.

‘Frowner! Frowner!’ she said. ‘What do *you* know about it? If you didn’t first season the new saucers by rubbing ginger-juice and sauce on the bottom and burning them in, they would crack when you put them on the heat.’

The others assured Dai-yu that this was so. Dai-yu, meanwhile, was reading through the list.

‘Just look!’ she said, laying a hand on Tan-chun’s arm and speaking to her in an undertone. ‘All those water-jars and chests of drawers and things to paint a picture! I think she must have got confused at this point and started making a list for her trousseau.’

This set Tan-chun off into a fit of the giggles. ‘Pinch her lips, Chai!’ she said. ‘You should hear what she’s been saying about you.’

‘I don’t need to,’ said Bao-chai. ‘One doesn’t expect ivory from a dog’s mouth!’

Bearing down on Dai-yu as she said this, 8he forced her back, laughing and protesting, upon the kang and made as if she would pinch her face.

‘Oh, please coz, forgive me!’ Dai-yu pleaded. ‘Little Frowner is younger than you and doesn’t know any better. You should teach me how to be good. If you won’t be nice to me, who else can I turn to?’

The others, not knowing what lay behind these words, were greatly amused.

‘Do forgive her!’ they said, laughing. ‘How pitifully she pleads! Even *we* are melted.’

But Bao-chai knew she was referring to their recent confrontation on the subject of forbidden books, and feeling rather embarrassed to have this dragged up in the midst of a playful tussle, hurriedly released her. Dai-yu rose to her feet laughing.

‘That’s my good coz. If it had been *me*, I should never have let *you* off!’

Bao-chai pointed her finger at Dai-yu and smiled at her indulgently.

‘I’m not surprised that Lady Jia is so fond of you or that the others find you so amusing. I can’t help being fond of you too, little coz. Come here and let me do your hair for you.’

Dai-yu turned her head obediently while Bao-chai refastened her back hair. Bao-yu, watching from where he sat, thought how much better it looked for Bao-chai’s attention, and wished that he had not told Dai-yu earlier to tidy the hair above her brows, for then Bao-chai could have done that for her too. His agreeable musings on the subject were interrupted by Bao-chai’s voice:

‘Have you finished writing the list? Perhaps you’d better be the one to see Lady Jia about it. If they’ve got those things here already, so much the better. If not, you’ll have to get some money to buy them with. In that case I might be able to advise you on where to go for them.’

Bao-yu folded up the list and stowed it away inside his jacket. They continued to sit a while longer, chatting about this and that.

After dinner they went to call on Grandmother Jia to see how she was. She had been suffering from nothing more serious than a slight chill aggravated by fatigue, and by the evening, after a day’s cosseting and two doses of the mild sudorific prescribed by Dr Wang, she was almost better.

If you want to know what the next day held in store, you will have to read the following chapter.

CHAPTER 43

An old woman’s whim is the occasion of a birthday collection
And a young man’s remorse finds solace in a simple ceremony

Our story recommences in Lady Wang’s apartment next day. On the previous evening’s visit she had found Grandmother Jia almost completely recovered after only two doses of the medicine prescribed for her that same morning by the doctor. Satisfied that it was only a mild chill, contracted during her day in Prospect Garden, and not anything more serious that the old lady had been suffering from, and deeming it unnecessary to make an early call again this morning, Lady Wang summoned Wang Xi-feng to her own apartment to discuss the getting together of some things to send to her husband, Jia Zheng. A summons from Grandmother Jia arrived nevertheless, and Lady Wang hurried over, taking Xi-feng with her, to see what was the matter.

‘Are you still feeling better today, Mother?’ she asked her when they arrived.

‘I’m quite recovered now, thank you,’ said Grandmother Jia. ‘I’ve had a sip or two of the pheasant stew you sent me. It was very tasty I ate some of the meat in it and enjoyed it very much.’

You have Feng to thank for that,’ said Lady Wang with a smile. ‘See how dutiful she is to you! It shows

that your kindness is not wasted on her.'

Grandmother Jia returned the smile and nodded affably.

'It was good of her to think of me. If there's any of the meat still left, I'd rather like a few pieces of it fried. It has a pleasant, salty tang that goes well with the rice-gruel I am taking The stew is very nice, but stew and gruel don't go very well together.'

Xi-feng at once sent orders to the main kitchen to have the pheasant-meat prepared.

'Well, it wasn't really my diet that I wanted to talk about,' said Grandmother Jia. 'The reason I've sent for you is because the second of the ninth month is Feng's birthday. In previous years, though I've always *meant* to do something about it, something or other has always cropped up which has prevented me from celebrating it properly. As we're all of us here together this year and it doesn't look as if there are likely to be any distractions, I propose that we should get together and make a day of it.'

'I was thinking just the same thing,' said Lady Wang. 'Since you feel in such good spirits, Mother, why not settle now what we should do?

'Well now, this is what I have been thinking,' said Grandmother Jia. 'In other years, no matter whose birthday it's been, we've each of us given our individual presents. Now that's *so* dull, and what's more, I think it's a rather unsociable way of celebrating a birthday. I've thought of a new way which will be much more sociable and also lots of fun.'

'Whatever it is, I'm sure that's what we ought to do,' said Lady Wang.

'I think we ought to imitate what they do in poorer families,' said Grandmother Jia. 'Everyone subscribes something towards a common pool, then, when it's all been collected, you spend it all on some treat or other, depending on how much you have. What do you think of the idea?'

'It sounds a very good one,' said Lady Wang. 'But how do we go about collecting the subscriptions ?'

At this Grandmother Jia became still more animated. Let Aunt Xue and Lady Xing be invited without delay, she told them. Let Bao-yu and the girls be sent for. And You-shi from the other mansion. And why not Lai Da's wife and some of the more respected older members of the female staff? Infected by her enthusiasm, the maids and older women-servants went scurrying off in all directions to summon or invite.

In less time than it would take to eat a meal, all those invited, young and old, mistress and servant, had been assembled, and the room was packed. Aunt Xue and Grandmother Jia sat on their own facing the multitude, Lady Xing and Lady Wang on chairs at the opposite side of the room beside the door. Bao-chai, Dai-yu, Xiang-yun and the Three Springs sat in a row at the back of the kang behind Grandmother Jia and Aunt Xue. Bao-yu half reclined in his grandmother's lap. All the rest stood, shoulder to shoulder, on the floor below.

As soon as she saw that they were all assembled, Grandmother Jia gave orders for stools to be brought so that Lai Da's mother and various other of the more aged and respected servants present might sit down. It was customary in the Jia household to treat the older generation of servants those who had served the parents of the present masters—with even greater respect than the younger generation of masters, so that in this instance it was not thought at all surprising that You-shi, Xi-feng and Li Wan should remain standing while old Mrs Lai and three or four other old nannies (though not without first apologizing for the liberty) seated themselves on the stools.

Grandmother Jia now smilingly announced the proposal that she had already outlined to Lady Wang. All present, it need hardly be said, were willing to fall in with it—some because they were on good terms with Xi-feng and were genuinely happy to give her pleasure, some because they were afraid of her and welcomed this as an opportunity of getting themselves into her good books, and all because in any case they could afford to do

so. Accordingly, as soon as Grandmother Jia had finished speaking, they all enthusiastically and with one voice agreed.

Grandmother Jia opened the list with her own subscription:

'I'll give twenty taels.'

'I'll follow Lady Jia,' said Aunt Xue. 'Twenty taels.'

Lady Xing and Lady Wang called next:

'We obviously can't put ourselves on a level with Lady Jia. Sixteen taels.'

You-shi and Li Wan, decreasing their call by a like amount, came next:

'Twelve taels.'

'We can't have you paying out that sort of money,' Grandmother Jia said to Li Wan, '—a young widow with no mean of her own. I'll pay yours for you.'

'Now don't get carried away, Grandma! 'said xi-feng. 'You ought to do your sums first before you start interfering. Don't forget you've already got two of the young folk, Bao-yu and Cousin Lin, to pay for besides your own contribution. It's all very well promising to pay these additional twelve taels for Li Wan in the heat of the moment, but later on you'll be wishing you hadn't. You'll probably end up by saying that it was all because of that wretched Feng that you had to pay out so much money and think of some trick for getting it back from me three or four times over. *I* know. Don't tell me I'm imagining this.'

This made everyone laugh.

'All right,' said Grandmother Jia, laughing herself. 'Then what do you propose?'

'Well now, it isn't even my birthday yet, but already I'm feeling uncomfortable because so much is being done for me,' said Xi-feng. 'It seems unlucky—so many people being put to so much expense on my account while I don't pay a penny myself. Pd feel a lot easier if you'd let me pay this contribution for Li Wan; then, when the day comes, I shall be able to eat and drink as much as I like without any fear of spoiling my luck.'

Grandmother Jia hesitated, but consented when Lady Xing and Lady Wang both insisted that this was the best solution.

'I've got another suggestion to make,' said xi-feng. 'Your own contribution Is twenty taels, Grandma, and on top of that you're going to be paying contributions for Bao-chai and Cousin Lin. It's true that Aunt Xue will be paying Cousin Chai's contribution on top of *her* twenty taels, but that doesn't seem quite so unfair. What *does* seem unfair to me is that Mother and Aunt Wang should be paying only sixteen taels each for themselves, yet paying no extras at all for any of the young people. I think you're getting the worst of this arrangement, Grannie.'

'See what a good girl my Feng is to me!' said Grandmother Jia delightedly. 'You're quite right, my dear. If you hadn't mentioned it, I should have let them get away with it—as usual!'

'All you need do, Grannie, is to make the two young people *their* responsibility. Let each pay for one of them.'

'That's fair,' said Grandmother Jia. 'Yes, that's what I'll do.'

Lai Da's old mother rose up from her stool in mock indignation.

'But this is rank mutiny! It makes me feel really angry on Their Ladyships' behalf. What, side with Her Old Ladyship against your husband's mother and your own father's sister? That's a arrant breach of the laws o' consanguinity!'

This sally was greeted with a burst of laughter from Grandmother Jia and all the others present. Old Mrs Lai remained standing until it had subsided and then made her own offer.

'If Mrs Zhu and Mrs Lian are each contributing twelve taels, I suppose we'd better go a step lower?'

‘Oh no, that won’t do at all!’ said Grandmother Jia. ‘You may be a step below them in rank, but you’re all wealthy women. I know you’ve got lots more money than they have. You can’t give *more,* of course, but at least you should give as much.’

The old women, led by Mrs Lai, willingly agreed.

‘The girls’ contribution will be only for form’s sake, anyway,’ said Grandmother Jia in reference to the row of figures sitting silently behind her on the kang. ‘I should think about the equivalent of a month’s allowance would be the right amount?

She turned to Faithful.

‘Come on, now I We’re not leaving *you* out! Go and get some of the other girls together and decide how much you are going to give.’

Faithful slipped out and presently returned with Patience,
Aroma, Suncloud and one or two other of the senior maids.
Some said they would give one tael, others two. Grandmother
Jia noticed that Patience was one of them.

‘Surely you’ll be doing something for your mistress at home?’ she said. ‘You don’t need to contribute to this fund as well.’

‘Yes, ma’am, I *shall* be doing something at home,’ said Patience, ‘but that’s private. This is a public thing, so I shall contribute to this along with the rest.’

Grandmother Jia smiled at her graciously and commended her public spirit.

‘Well,’ said Xi-feng genially, ‘now just about everyone seems to have been roped in except Aunt Zhou and Aunt Zhao. Wouldn’t it be a politeness to ask them if they would like to contribute as well? They might take it as a slight if we left them out.’

‘Of course,’ said Grandmother Jia. ‘Whatever made me forget about *them?* They probably won’t be free to come over, though. One of the maids had better go and ask them.’

One of the maids had gone off on this mission almost before she had finished speaking. She returned, after a long interval, to say that the concubines would contribute two taels each.

‘Good!’ said Grandmother Jia. ‘Now take a brush and ink, someone, and calculate how much we shall have altogether.’

In the interval thus created, You-shi addressed xi-feng in a scornful whisper.

‘What a mean, grasping young woman you are! Your aunt and your mother-in-law and all these other people forking out for your birthday, yet you still have to go squeezing more out of two poor, dried-up old gourds like Zhou and Zhao!’

Xi-feng laughed silently.

‘Don’t talk nonsense!’ she whispered back. ‘I’ll settle accounts with you presently, when we get out of here. Anyway, what do you mean, “poor”? Whenever they’ve ~*t* any money they only pass it straight on to other people. We might just as well intercept it before it gets into the hands of their creditors and get a bit of pleasure out of it!’

By the time this whispered exchange was over, the calculations had been completed and it was announced that the amounts promised totalled a round sum of one hundred and fifty taels with a few taels left over.

‘That’s more than we could possibly spend on plays and wine in one day,’ said Grandmother Jia.

‘As we’re not inviting anyone from outside,’ said You-shi, ‘it won’t be a very *big* party, either. There should be enough for two or three days. The big saving, of course, is that now you’ve got your own troupe of

players, you can have first-class entertainment for nothing.'

'Feng shall have whatever troupe she prefers,' said Grandmother Jia. 'That's for *her* to decide.'

'We've heard our own troupe so often,' said Xi-feng. 'I think we should spend a bit of money and get in a troupe from outside.'

'Well, I propose to leave all the arrangements for this in the hands of Cousin Zhen's wife,' said Grandmother Jia, then Feng will have nothing at all to worry about - except how to get the greatest possible enjoyment out of her birthday!'

You-shi agreed to be organizer, after which she and the others stayed charting for a few minutes with Grandmother Jia. Then, realizing that the old lady's stock of energy was exhausted, they gradually dispersed.

After the three younger women had seen Lady Xing and Lady Wang a part of their way home, You-shi accompanied xi-feng to the latter's apartment to discuss with her what arrangements she should make for the party.

'Don't ask *me,'* said Xi-feng when You-shi questioned her. 'You want to study Grandmother and just do whatever seems to please *her.'*

'You really are the limit, you know,' said You-shi. 'Fortune's darling! I thought just now that I was being called over about something serious, but it turned out to be just for *this!* And then, if you please, quite apart from being asked to pay out money, I am to have all the worry of arranging everything for you as well. What are you going to do in return for all this, to show me your gratitude?'

'What am I going to do in return?' said Xi-feng. 'You must be joking. *I* didn't call you over. If you're afraid of the trouble, you'd better go back to Grandmother and tell her to give the job to somebody else.'

'Just look at her I' said You-shi. 'Really full of yourself today, aren't you? I should hold it in a bit, if I were you, my dear, or it might start running overt'

The two of them conversed for some minutes longer before finally separating.

*

When the first contributions arrived at Ning-guo House next morning, You-shi had only just got up and was about to begin her toilet. She asked who had brought the money, and on being informed that it was Lin Zhi-xiao's wife, sent the maid back to fetch her in from the servants' quarters, where she was waiting. When she arrived, You-shi asked for a stool to be brought so that the old woman could sit and talk to her while she continued with her toilet.

'How many of the contributions have you got in this packet?' You-shi asked her.

'These are the ones from us servants,' said Lin Zhi-xiao's wife. 'As they were al] ready, I thought I might as well bring them over straight away. The contributions from Her Old Ladyship and the other ladies are still to come.'

Just then one of the maids came in to announce another arrival

'The subscriptions from Mrs Xue and Lady .Xing have arrived, ma'am.'

'Subscriptions!' said You-shi scornfully. 'How eagerly you fasten on the ridiculous word! It was only a passing fancy of Her Old Ladyship's yesterday that we should imitate what they do in poorer households. She used the word then as a joke; but now, I suppose, we shall have every witless maid solemnly talking about "subscriptions" all the time! Well, go and get the money and bring it in then. And see that whoever it is has some tea before they go.'

The girl went out and returned with the two packets of money that the messenger had brought, one from Aunt Xue, including a contribution for Bao-chai, and one, including Dai-yu's contribution, from Lady Xing.

'Who does that leave now?' said You-shi.

'That leaves Her Old Ladyship, Her Ladyship, the young ladies and the maids,' said Lin Zhi-xiao's wife.

'What about Mrs Zhu's?' said You-shi.

Mrs Lian will be paying Out the money for all the others,' said Lin Zhi-xiao's wife, 'so you'll be able to get Mrs Zhu's from her too when you see her about the rest.'

You-shi, having completed her toilet, now called for her carriage. As soon as it was ready, she drove round to the Rong-guo mansion and went straight in to see Xi-feng. She found her with the money already packeted and on the point of bringing it round to her.

'Is it *all* here?' You-shi asked her.

'All there,' said Xi-feng gaily. 'Hurry up and take it away. I don't want to he responsible for it if it gets lost.'

'I don't think I altogether trust you,' said You-shi, returning her smile. 'I think I'd like to check it first in your presence.'

She opened up the packet and counted the money contained in it. The contribution for Li Wan appeared to be missing.

'I *thought* you were up to something,' she said. 'Why isn't the money for Wan here?'

Xi-feng smiled disarmingly.

'Isn't what you've already got there enough? Surely *her* little bit isn't going to make all that much difference? Why not wait and see what you need? If you find you haven't got enough, I'll give the money for Wan to you later.'

'I'm not letting you get away with this,' said You-shi, '—playing the Lady Bountiful yesterday in front of all those others and then going back on it now, when the two of us are alone together. I shall have to go and ask Lady Jia for the money.'

'You're a hard woman!' said Xi-feng. 'One of these days when I have *you* at a disadvantage, you mustn't complain if you find me just as much of a stickler.'

'Threats?' said You-shi. 'I think you are the one who should feel afraid. Do you think if it weren't for the things you have done for me in the past I would let you off now? Here, Patience!'—She took Patience's contribution from the pile and held it out to her 'Take this back. If later on I find that I need it, I'll make it good with my own money.'

Patience immediately understood what she was getting at and answered in the same vein.

'No, Mrs Zhen, you keep it. If you find you have any left over, you can give it back to me afterwards.'

'Take it,' said You-shi. 'Is your mistress the only one who's allowed to break the rules? Mayn't I do favours too, if I want to?'

Patience was obliged to take the money from her.

'Seeing your mistress so tight-fisted,' said You-shi, 'I often wonder what she's going to do with all this money she saves. Take it with her in her coffin?'

With that parting shot she went off to see Grandmother Jia. After greeting the old lady and exchanging a few generalities, she went into Faithful's room for a more serious discussion of arrangements for the birthday party. The 'discussion' consisted quite simply in finding out what would give Grandmother Jia most pleasure and deciding that that was what they should do. When all had been settled between them and You-shi was rising to go,

she took out the two taels that Faithful had contributed and handed them back to her.

'Here you are. We shan't be needing this.'

From Grandmother Jia's apartment she went over to have a few words with Lady Wang. When Lady Wang presently left her to go into her Buddhist chapel, You-shi took advantage of her absence to return Suncloud's contribution; then, since xi-feng was safely out of the way, she offered Aunt Zhou and Aunt Zhao their contributions as well. But the concubines were too scared to take them.

'Go on I' said You-shi encouragingly. 'I know how hard-up you are. You can't afford to give away money like this. If Feng finds Out, I shall take full responsibility myself.'

They took the money then, voluble in their gratitude.

*

In a twinkling the second of the ninth was upon them. The denizens of the Garden had been informed that You-shi was planning an impressive variety of entertainment: not only the customary plays, but also juggling, acrobatics, story-telling by blind ballad-singers—in short, everything one could possibly think of that might contribute to the success of the occasion and the pleasure of the participants.

Li Wan reminded the cousins that the second of the month was also one of the regular meeting-days of the poetry club. Xi-chun was, of course, excused.

'But why hasn't Bao-yu turned up?' she asked. 'I suppose he's so intent on enjoying the film that he has forgotten his former enthusiasm for these more civilized amusements!—Go and see what he's doing,' she said to one of the maids, 'and tell him to come here immediately.'

The maid was a long time gone.

'Miss Aroma says he went out first thing this morning,' she reported when she eventually returned.

The others were incredulous.

'That's ridiculous. How could he possibly have gone out? The girl must have got the message wrong.'

They sent Ebony over to ask again; but Ebony only confirmed what the first maid had said.

'Yes, lie really has gone out. It seems that one of his friends has died and he's had to go out to condole.'

'That's absolutely absurd,' said Tan-chun. 'Whatever the reason, he can't possibly have gone out *today*. Fetch Aroma here and I'll speak to her myself.'

As if anticipating a summons, Aroma herself walked in while she was saying this. Li Wan tackled her at once.

'There's absolutely no justification for his going out today, whatever the reason,' she said. 'In the first place it's Mrs Lian's birthday and Her Old Ladyship was particularly anxious that we should all join in celebrating it this year: it's monstrous that he should go off on his own like this when everyone else from both houses is here for the celebration. And in the second place this is the first regular meeting of our poetry club and he hasn't even asked leave to stay away.'

Aroma sighed miserably.

'Last night he told me that he had some important business to attend to first thing this morning. He said he had to go to the Prince of Beijing's palace, but that he would be back again as soon as possible. I *told* him not to go, but he insisted. When he got up first thing this morning, he asked for a suit of mourning to wear. It looks as if some important person in the Prince of Beijing's household must have died.'

'If that's really so,' said Li Wan, 'then he *ought* to have gone. But then, on the other hand, he ought to have

got back by now.'

After a brief discussion the cousins decided to proceed without him and to punish him in some way when he returned. Before they could begin, however, a summons arrived from Grandmother Jia to join her in the mansion. As soon as they had done so, Aroma reported Bao-yu's absence. The old lady was displeased and sent someone to fetch him back.

Bao-yu, evidently with some secret business on his mind, had spoken the day before to Tealeaf about this excursion,

'I have to go out first thing tomorrow,' he told him. 'I want you to be waiting for me outside the back gate with two horses ready saddled. No one else is to accompany me but you. Tell Li Gui that I am going to the Prince of Beijing's, and that he must stop anyone going out to look for me. He can tell them that the Prince is detaining me and that I shall come back as soon as I can get away.'

Though somewhat mystified by these orders, Tealeaf felt he had no choice but to follow them out, and before dawn next morning was waiting with two horses ready saddled outside the tear gate of the Garden. As soon as it was light, Bao-yu, dressed in heavy mourning, emerged from the postern, leaped onto one of the waiting horses, and crouching down over the reins, set off at a brisk trot down the street—all without uttering a single word.

Tealeaf leaped onto the second horse, gave it the whip, and did his best to catch up with Bao-yu, at the same time shouting after him to inquire where they were going.

'Where does this road lead to?' Bao-yu asked him.

'This is the main road to the North Gate,' said Tealeaf. Outside the city it's pretty deserted in that direction. You won't find much to amuse you there.'

Good,' said Bao-yu. The more deserted the better.'

And by applying the whip he made his horse shoot on ahead, and presently, after a couple of turns, had left the city gate behind him.

Tealeaf, more mystified than ever, followed him as closely as he could. When they had galloped without stopping for two or three miles, in the course of which the signs of human habitation had gradually grown more and more sparse, Bao-yu finally reined to a halt and turned back to ask Tealeaf if there was anywhere where they could purchase some incense.

'I dare say we could find *somewhere,*' said Tealeaf without much conviction. 'It depends what kind of incense you want.'

Bao-yu reflected for some moments.

'Honeybush, sandal and lakawood,' he said. 'It has to be those three.'

'I doubt if you'll be able to get *them,*' said Tealeaf, smiling at the naïveté of one who could expect to make such purchases in such a place. But when he saw that Bao-yu was genuinely distressed, he added: What's it for? I've noticed that you often carry powdered incense in that sachet you wear. Why not see if you've got any in that?'

Bao-yu, glad to be reminded, extracted the silk purse that he wore suspended from his neck underneath the front fold of his gown, felt inside it with his fingers, and was delighted to find that there was still a pinch or two of powdered agalloch in the bottom.

'Seems a bit lacking in respect to use this though,' he thought.

'Still, it's more respectful to use something I've carried all the way here myself than it would be to use something I'd just bought in a shop.'

Having decided that the powdered incense would do, he asked Tealeaf where he could get hold of an incense-burner and some fire.

'Now those we *can't* get,' said Tealeaf. 'Where *could* we, Out here in the middle of the wilds? If you knew you were going to need them, why didn't you tell me beforehand, and we could have brought them with us?'

'Stupid idiot I' said Bao-yu. 'Do you honestly think we could have ridden out at this break-neck pace if we'd been carrying an incense-burner full of hot coals with us?'

Tealeaf, after some moments of reflection, smiled uncertainly:

'I know what we *could* do, Master, though I don't know what you'll think of the idea. There's little enough hope of our getting the things you've just asked for round here, and the chances are that even if we could, you'd only start thinking of something else you needed that was even harder to get. Now if we were to go on for about another two thirds of a mile in this direction, we should come to the Temple of the Water Spirit Bao-yu pricked up his ears.

'The Temple of the Water Spirit? Is that near here? Good. That will do even better. Let's go there then.'

With a touch of the whip he was away once more, still talking to Tealeaf over his shoulder as he rode ahead.

'The nun at the Water Spirit is one of our regular callers. If I see *her* when we get there and tell her we want to use one of her burners, she's sure to let us.'

'Even if this wasn't one of the temples we subscribe to,' said Tealeaf, 'I'm sure they wouldn't dare refuse if you asked them. But why is it that today you are so willing to go to the Temple of the Water Spirit when normally you can scarcely abide to hear it mentioned?'

'The reason I normally feel that way about it,' said Bao-yu, 'is because I hate the silly, senseless way in which vulgar people offer worship and build temples to gods they know nothing about. Ignorant old men and women with too much money to spend hear the name of some god or other—they've no idea who it is, but the mere fact that they've heard it from the lips of some ballad-singer or story-teller seems to them incontrovertible proof of the god's existence—and go founding temples in which these fictitious deities can he worshipped.

'Take this Temple of the Water Spirit. The reason it's called that is because the divinity worshipped in it is supposed to be the goddess of the river Luo. Now in point of fact no Goddess

of the Luo ever existed. She was an invention of the poet Cao Zhi. But that didn't stop a lot of people making an image of her and worshipping it.

'The only reason I feel differently about this temple today is because the *idea* of a water-goddess just happens to fit in with the thing that is at the moment uppermost in my mind; so I'm glad to make use of it *for my own purpose.'*

By this time they had reached the gate of the temple. The old nun who kept it, hardly less surprised to hear of Bao-yu's arrival than she would have been if she had been told that a dragon had just fallen, alive and kicking, out of the sky, hurried out to greet him, and ordered the old temple-servant who did duty as a porter to take care of the horses.

Bao-yu went on inside. Instead of bowing down before the image, however, he stood and contemplated it appraisingly. Though the goddess was only a thing of wood and plaster and paint, the sculptor who made her had succeeded in capturing some of the spirit of Cao Zhi's famous description. To Bao-yu's gazing eyes she did indeed appear as the poet portrayed her:

Fluttering like the wing-beats of a startled swan,
Swaying with the lissome curves of a water-dragon...

Cao Zhi's beautiful images came crowding into his mind:

> Like a lotus flower emerging from the **green** water,
> Like the morning sun rising above the mist-bank...

And as he gazed and remembered, the tears coursed down his cheeks.

The old nun now appeared with some tea. While he sipped it, Bao-yu took the opportunity of asking her if he might borrow an incense-burner. At this she disappeared once more, to reappear, after considerable delay, carrying not only a burner but also a whole portion of incense and a set of garishly printed 'picture-offerings'. Refusing all but the burner, Bao-yu made Tealeaf carry it outside into the rear courtyard of the temple, where he set about choosing a suitably dean spot on

which to make his offering. Nowhere would do, however, until Tealeaf suggested placing the burner on the stone platform of the well. To this suggestion Bao-yu assented with a nod, and when Tealeaf had set down the burner and retired to a respectful distance, he took out his pinch of agalloch and dropped it on the burning charcoal; then, with tears in his eyes, he knelt down and made, not a kotow, but the sort of half-obeisance one makes to the spirit of a junior or a servant.

Having concluded his little ceremony, Bao-yu got up and ordered Tealeaf to take the burner back into the temple. But Tealeaf, though saying that he would, did nothing of the kind. Instead he threw himself on his knees, kotowed several times, and began praying aloud in the direction of the well

'O spirit, in all the years I have served Master Bao this is the first time he has ever kept anything from me. But though I don't know who you are, O spirit, and don't like to ask, one *thing* I *do* know, and that is that you are sure to be some wondrously beautiful, clever, refined young female. And since Master Bao isn't able to tell you Out loud what he wants of you, I, Tealeaf, am praying to you on his behalf.

'I beseech you, if you still have feelings as you used to when you were on earth, watch over my master from time to time, O spirit. I know you belong to a different world now, but being as it's for a special friend of yours that I'm asking this, please do it if you can, spirit, for old time's sake.

'And please use what influence you can to see that Master Bao is reborn in his next life as a girl, so that he can spend all his time with you; and don't let him be reborn as one of those horrible Whiskered Males he is always on about.'

At this point he knocked his head several more times on the ground. Bao-yu, who had been listening, could no longer hold back his laughter. Observing that Tealeaf had raised himself once more on all fours and appeared to be about to go on, he kicked him and told him to get up.

'Stop this nonsense! If anyone hears you, I shall become a laughing-stock.'

Tealeaf scrambled to his feet, picked up the burner and followed Bao-yu inside.

'I've already spoken to the nun about getting you some food,' he told Bao-yu as they were going in together. 'I told her you hadn't eaten yet. You ought to get something inside you. I realize that you came out here because there's a big party and lots of racket at home today and you wanted somewhere peaceful where you could do this. But I think just staying out here in the quiet all day is showing all the respect you need to this person you've just made the offering to. You don't need to fast all day as well. That's out of the question.'

'That seems reasonable,' said Bao-yu. 'As I'm missing the patty all the time that I'm here, I am in a way abstaining already; so I suppose there can be no harm in my taking a bit of vegetarian stuff.'

‘I’m glad to hear you say so,’ said Tealeaf. ‘Of course, there is another way of looking at it. Your going off like this is sure to cause others at home to worry. Now if no one at home was likely to worry, there’d be no harm in our not going back until evening. But since they *are* going to worry, I really think you ought to be getting back soon. For one thing it will set Their Ladyships’ minds at rest, and for another, it will, in the long run, be more respectful to this person you’ve just made the offering to. Because if you go home, even if you drink and watch plays, it won’t be because you want to, but out of duty to Their Ladyships. Whereas if you stay out here thinking only about the spirit and not caring how worried you make Their Ladyships, you’ll in fact be making the spirit herself uneasy to think of all the anxiety that’s being caused on her behalf. Think it over, Master Bao, and see if you don’t agree with me.’

‘I can see what’s on your mind without much difficulty,’ said Bao-yu, laughing. ‘You’re afraid that *as you* are the only one who came out here with me, *you* will bear all the blame for this outing when we get back. That’s the real reason why I’m being treated to all this high-minded advice, isn’t it? Well, don’t worry! It was all along my intention to go back to the party when I had made the offering. *I* never said anything about staying out here all day. I’ve discharged my vow. If I hurry home now so that the others aren’t too worried, it seems to me that my obligations to the dead and the living swill *both* be met.’

Tealeaf expressed his relief. Still talking, they made their way to the old nun’s parlour, or hall of meditation’, where they found she had set out a very presentable (though, of course, vegetarian) repast for them. After briefly sampling it, the two of them mounted and set off again along the road by which they had come Bao-yu at such a pace that Tealeaf was obliged to call out after him to slacken it.

‘Go easy on that horse, Master Bad! He hasn’t been ridden very much; you need to keep a pretty tight rein on him.’

Soon they had entered the city gate, and not long after-wards might have been seen slipping into the back gate of the Garden. Bao-yu hurried straight to **Green** Delights, which he found deserted except for a few old nannies left behind as care-takers.

‘Holy name!’ they said, their old faces lighting up with pleasure when they saw who it was. ‘You’ve come at last! You’ve had Miss Aroma nigh out of her mind with worry. They’re sitting at table in the front now, Master. Better hurry up and join them.’

Bao-yu quickly took off his mourning clothes and went off to look for something more colourful to change into.

‘Where *is* the party?’ he asked the old women as soon as he had dressed.

‘In the new reception room.’

He hurried, by the shortest route, towards the faint sounds of fluting and singing that could soon be heard coming from the so-called ‘new’ reception hall that the old women had referred to. As he approached the gallery through which he must pass to reach it, he came upon Silver, sitting under the eaves of the covered way and crying. She left off hurriedly when she saw him coming.

‘Here comes the phoenix at last!’ she said sarcastically. ‘Hurry up and go inside. If you stay away much longer, there’ll be a riot!’

Bao-yu smiled at her sympathetically.

‘Guess where I’ve been.’

She ignored his question and turned away from him to wipe her eyes. He hurried on, dejected because of his inability to comfort her. When he entered the hall were the others were assembled and went up to greet his grandmother and his mother, it really *was* as if a phoenix had appeared. Hurriedly he made his birthday kotow to

Xi-feng.

'What do you mean by going off on your own like that?' Grandmother Jia grumbled. 'I never heard of such a thing. If this happens again, I shall tell your father when he comes back and get him to give you another beating.'

Bao-yu's pages came in next for her censure.

'Why do they listen to him - rushing off like that whenever he tells them to? They should tell *us* first. Where *have* you been, anyway?' she asked him. 'Have you had anything to eat? Has anything happened to give you a fright?'

'The Prince of Beijing's favourite concubine died yesterday,' said Bao-yu. 'I went to condole with him. He was in such a state when I got there that I didn't like to leave immediately. That's why I've been so long.'

'If you sneak out again without first telling us,' said Grandmother Jia, 'I really *shall* tell your Pa to beat you.'

Though Bao-yu promised to obey, she still wanted to have his pages whipped; but the others all begged for a reprieve:

'Don't take it to heart, Grandmother! He's already said he won't do it again. And anyway, he's back now, so we can forget our worries and concentrate on enjoying ourselves'

Grandmother Jia had in fact been extremely worried and her anxiety had made her vengeful. Now that Bao-yu was back and she was no longer worried, her vengeful feelings evaporated and the subject of beatings was quickly dropped. Her concern now was lest Bao-yu should have been unduly distressed by his visit, or have failed to eat enough while he was away, or have been involved in some accident on the way there or back. While she continued to fuss over him, Aroma took her place at his side to wait upon him, and the rest of the company resumed the play-watching which his arrival had interrupted.

The play being performed on this occasion was *The Wooden Hairpin*. Grandmother Jia and the other ladies found it greatly affecting, shedding copious teats in the course of it and sighing or cursing in the appropriate places.

The events that ensued will be told in the following chapter.

CHAPTER 44

Xi-feng's jealousy is the object of an unexpected provocation
And Patience's toilet is a source of unexpected delight

BAO-YU having now taken his place amongst the girls, they and the rest of the company were once more able to give their undivided attention to the players.

The play being performed on this occasion was, as we noted at the end of the previous chapter, *The Wooden Hairpin*, and it chanced that they had reached that section of it popularly referred to as 'The Husband's Offering', in which the hero Wang Shi-peng, believing that his wife has drowned herself, goes with his aged mother to the river Ou-jiang to make offerings to her soul. At this point Dai-yu, who was able to guess what the real purpose of Bao-yu's early-morning excursion had been, turned to Bao-chai and remarked, in a voice loud enough for Bao-yu to overhear, that she thought Wang Shi-peng a 'very silly sort of fellow

'He could have made his offering anywhere. Why was it necessary for him to go rushing off to the riverside

to make it? They say that “objects aid recall”: well, since all the water in the world comes ultimately from a single source, a bowlful of it scooped up anywhere should have sufficed. His feelings could have been just as effectively relieved by weeping over a bowlful of water as by rushing off to the banks of the river.’

Bao-chai made no reply. Bao-yu, who had certainly heard her, turned away and called for hot wine to drink Xi-feng’s health with.

Grandmother Jia was determined that this should be a day like no other and that Xi-feng should derive the greatest possible enjoyment from it. Not feeling sufficiently energetic to sit with the rest, however, she had retired to the inner room with Aunt Xue, reclining on a couch there in a position from which it was still possible to watch the players. A small selection from the dishes which had covered the two tables laid for her outside had been set down within easy reach where she could pick at them while conversing with Aunt Xue. The remainder she had made over to the maids and older women on duty who had not been catered for, bidding them take their banquet outside on to the verandah where they could sit down and enjoy themselves without restraint.

Lady Wang and Lady Xing also sat in this inner room, not on the kang, where Grandmother Jia’s couch had been placed, but at a high-topped table on the floor below. The young people sat at a number of tables in the outer room. From time to time Grandmother Jia would give orders to You-shi to make sure that Xi-feng was enjoying herself.

‘Make her sit at the head. Why isn’t she sitting at the head? It’s up to you to act as hostess on my behalf,’ she told You-shi. ‘The poor child is run off her feet all the rest of the year. Today I want her to be made a fuss of.’

You-shi went off to do her bidding, but shortly afterwards returned, a smile on her face, to announce that Xi-feng was being difficult.

‘She says she’s not used to sitting at the head. She says it makes her uncomfortable. And she refuses to drink anything.’

‘If you can’t make her, I shall have to come out and deal with her myself,’ said Grandmother Jia, laughing.

This brought Xi-feng herself running up. She spoke to Grandmother Jia from behind You-shi’s shoulder.

‘Don’t believe her, Grannie. I’ve had lots and lots to drink.’

‘Now look here,’ said Grandmother Jia to You-shi, ‘I want you to march this young woman back to her seat and *force* her to sit down in it. Then I want every one of you here to drink with her in turn. If she still refuses, I really and truly shall come out and deal with her myself.’

You-shi hauled Xi-feng out again, cal1ed for larger cups to be brought, and poured her out some wine.

There you are, my darling! In token of my appreciation of the noble way in which you have served Lady Jia and Lady Wang and me during the past year, please accept this cup of wine that I have poured out for you with my own fair hand!’

‘If you are really serious about wanting to show me your appreciation,’ said Xi-feng, ‘you ought to offer it to me kneeling down.’

‘Just listen to that!’ said You-shi. ‘I’ll tell you something, my girl you just don’t realize how lucky you are. For all you know, things may never be as good as this for you again. If I were you, I’d have a good booze-up while you can. Come on, *two* cups!’

You-shi was so insistent that in the end Xi-feng had to drink two whole cupfuls from the larger cups. After that the cousins came up one by one to drink with her, which meant that she had to take at least a sip or two with each of them. Then old Mrs Lai, observing with what high spirits Grand-mother Jia was watching these antics, determined to join in the fun too, and came over, with the other old nannies, to drink Xi-feng’s health along with

all the rest. Because of the seniority of this group, it would have been difficult for Xi-eng to refuse them, so with each of them too she had to take a couple of sips. But when Faithful and the maids came trooping up, it was more than flesh and blood could bear and she begged to be excused.

Really, my dears, I couldn't. Let me put it off until tomorrow.'

Faithful pretended to take umbrage.

'I call that most insulting! Even Her Ladyship treats me with more consideration. I used to think that I counted for something round here, but now, after being put in my place in front of all these others, I can see that I did wrong to come. Well, if you won't drink, I'm going!'

She turned away and began marching out, but Xi-feng ran after and detained her.

'No, please! I'll drink,'

She fetched the wine herself, filled a cup to the brim with it' and drank it down to the last drop, up-ending it afterwards to show that it was dry. At that Faithful laughed and went away content.

As soon as she had resumed her seat, Xi-feng knew that she had drunk too much. Her heart was pounding in her throat and she felt an overwhelming desire to go back home and lie down. But the leader of the jugglers was bearing down on her.

'Give this man his money,' she said, turning to You-shi, 'I have to go home to wash.'

You-shi nodded, and Xi-feng, choosing a moment when no one was looking, slipped outside and made her way along the outside of the hall under the shadow of the eaves. Patience, who had seen her go and was concerned about her, hurried after and gave her some support.

As they approached the passage-way which led from Grandmother Jia's rear courtyard to the gallery in the midst of the little enclosure surrounded by wails and buildings which had once been the scene of Jia Rui's night-long sufferings, they recognized one of the junior maids from their own apartment standing there, who, as soon as she caught sight of them, turned tail and ran, Xi-feng at once became suspicious and called out after her. The little maid at first pretended not to hear, but when the shouting behind her continued, could no longer keep up the pretence and had to turn about and face them.

Xi-feng's suspicions were now thoroughly aroused. Advancing into the gallery and calling the maid back into it, she first made Patience close the partitions, so that they were completely cut off from the outside, then, seating herself on the gallery's stone plinth and ordering the maid to kneel down in front of her, she told Patience in a fierce, loud voice to fetch two pages from the inner gate with a rope and whips to 'flog to a jelly' this abominable creature who had so little regard for the presence of her mistress. The wretched girl, already half-dead with fright, now wept for terror and knocked her head repeatedly on the ground, entreating Xi-feng for mercy.

'I'm not a ghost,' said Xi-feng. 'You're supposed to stand still and wait when you see me coming. What do you mean by running away from me like that?'

'I didn't see you at first, ma'am,' said the little girl tearfully. 'I was running because I'd just remembered that there was no one at home to look after things.'

'If there's no one at home, you had no business to go out in the first place,' said Xi-feng. 'And even if you didn't see me, you must have heard me calling you. Patience and I shouted to you at the tops of our voices ten or a dozen times, but you only ran the faster. We weren't all that far away from you, either, and you certainly aren't deaf. How dare you lie to me!'

She raised her hand and dealt the girl a slap on the cheek that made her reel, quickly followed by a second slap on the other cheek. An angry **red** patch swelled up instantly on either side of the girl's face.

‘Don’t, madam. You’ll hurt your hand,’ Patience pleaded.

‘Hit her for me, then,’ said Xi-feng, ‘and ask her why she ran away. If she still won’t talk, tear her lips!’

At first the maid tried sticking to her story, but when she heard that Xi-feng was going to heat an iron red-hot and burn her mouth with it, she broke down and tearfully confessed that Jia Lian was at home and had stationed her in the passage-way to look out for her mistress and give him warning of her coming; hut as Xi-feng had left the party so much earlier than expected, she had been taken unawares.

This seemed to Xi-feng to have the ring of truth about it.

‘*Why* did he ask you to look out for me?’ she asked. ‘Surely I’m allowed to go back to my own room? There must have been a reason. Tell me. If you do, from now on I shall love you and be your friend. But if you don’t, I shall take a knife and cut your flesh with it!’

To reinforce her threat, she plucked a formidable hairpin from her hair and jabbed it violently in the neighbourhood of the girl’s mouth, causing her to dodge this way and that from it in terror.

‘I’ll tell, madam, I’ll tell. Only please don’t let him know that it was me that told you,’ she wept and implored.

Patience begged Xi-feng not to hurt the girl, at the same time urging the girl to make a clean breast of what she had to say. The story then came out.

‘Mr Lian came in a while ago and had a bit of a nap. When he woke up, he sent someone to see what you were doing. They brought word back that your birthday party had only just started and you wouldn’t be back for ages, so he opened the chest and took out two pieces of silver and two hairpins and two lengths of satin and told me to go and give them in secret to Bao Er’s missus and tell her to come over. So then she came over to our room and Mr Lian made me go and wait in the passage here and look out for you. And that’s really all I know.’

Xi-feng was by now shaking all over with anger. She pulled herself to her feet notwithstanding and strode off swiftly towards the house. As she approached the gateway of the courtyard, another little maid popped her head out but quickly drew it in again and ran when she saw that it was Xi-feng. When Xi-feng called to her by name, however, this maid, being more quick-witted than the other one, neither went on retreating nor stood still, but simply turned about and came running up to Xi-feng outside, an obsequious little smile upon her face.

‘Oh madam, I was just going over to tell you when I saw you coming here yourself.’

‘Tell me what?’ said Xi-feng.

The girl then proceeded to relate voluntarily what the other girl had just told under duress.

Xi-feng spat contemptuously.

‘You’ve left it a bit late, haven’t you—waiting until you see me and then trying to act the innocent ?’

She raised her hand and struck the girl a blow that sent her staggering, then, tiptoeing across the courtyard, applied her ear to the window to hear what was going on inside.

The first thing she heard was a laugh and a woman’s voice.

‘The best thing that could happen to you,’ it was saying, ‘would be if that hell-cat wife of yours was to die.’

‘Suppose she did,’ Jia Lian’s voice said in answer, ‘and I married another one who turned out to be just as bad ?’

‘If she *was* to die,’ said the first voice, ‘you ought to make Patience your Number One. I’m sure she’d be better than this one.’

‘Patience won’t let me come near her nowadays,’ said Jia Lian. ‘She has a lot to put up with, the same as me, that she doesn’t dare talk about. I don’t know, I reckon I must have been born under a hen-pecked husbands’ star!’

Xi-feng heard this shaking with fury. The couple's praise of Patience made her at once suspect that Patience had been complaining about her behind her back. The fumes of wine mounted up inside her, clouding her judgement. Without pausing to reflect, she turned and struck Patience twice before kicking open the door and striding into the room. There, without more ado, she proceeded to seize hold of Bao Er's wife and belabour her, breaking off only to block the doorway with her body in case Jia Lian might think of escaping.

'Filthy whore I' she shouted. 'Stealing a husband isn't enough for you, it seems. You have to murder his wife as well!' She turned to Patience: 'Go on, Patience, your place is over there with them—with that whoremaster of yours and his other whore! You're all three in this together. You hate me just as much as they do under that smarmy outside of yours I'

This was followed by several blows.

Poor Patience, overwhelmed by so much injustice, had only Bao Er's wife on whom she could vent her feelings.

If you *have* to do these shameful things,' she said, 'you might at least leave me out of it.' And she began to pummel the woman in her turn.

Now Jia Lian had had a good deal to drink that day, and because of the euphoric state he was in, had taken insufficient precautions against surprise. Xi-feng's unexpected arrival had therefore left him completely at a loss. But Patience's outburst was another matter. The wine he had drunk rekindled his forgotten valour; and whereas the anger and shame he felt at seeing Xi-feng beat Bao Er's wife had rendered him speechless, the sight of Patience doing the same thing so roused his valiancy that he shouted at her and gave her a kick.

'Little whore! You want to join in too, do you ?'

Patience, whose gentle nature was easily overawed, at once left off, tearfully protesting that it was cruel of them to speak about her in such a way behind her back.

Xi-feng, furious that Patience should be afraid of Jia Lian, rushed over and began striking her again, insisting that she should go on beating Bao Er's wife and take no notice of him. Finding herself thus attacked on both sides simultaneously by the pair of them, Patience became so desperate that she dashed from the room, vowing that she would find a knife and kill herself, and would undoubtedly have done herself an injury if the maids and nannies from outside had not seized her and gradually talked her out of it.

Xi-feng's reaction when Patience dashed off threatening suicide was to ram her head into Jia Lian's chest and shout hysterically.

'You're all in league against me, and now you're trying to frighten me because I overheard you. I don't care. Kill me! Strangle me!'

Jia Lian, in a fury, snatched a sword down from the wall and drew it from its scabbard.

'There's no need for any of you to talk about suicide. I'm desperate too. I'll kill the lot of you and swing for it. That'll make a clean end of the business!'

Just as the rumpus was at its height, You-shi arrived with a crowd of others.

'What on earth is happening? A moment ago everyone was enjoying themselves, and now here you all are shouting at each other!'

With the arrival of this audience Jia Lian pretended to be even drunker than he really was, striking a fiercely threatening attitude and behaving as if he was seriously intending to kill Xi-feng with his sword. Xi-feng, on the other hand, dropped me shrewishness she had up to then been showing as soon as she saw them come and, breaking quickly away, ran weeping to Grandmother Jia.

The play had already ended when Xi-feng burst in upon the aged matriarch and flung herself trembling

upon her bosom.

'Save me, Grannie, save me! Mr Lian is going to kill me!'

'What?' cried Grandmother Jia, Lady Xing and Lady Wang in startled simultaneity.

'When I went home just now to change my clothes,' Xi-feng tearfully related, 'I was surprised to hear Mr Lian indoors talking to somebody. I was scared to go in straight away, thinking it must be a guest, so I listened for a while outside the window. Then I found that it wasn't a guest that he was with but Bao Er's wife, and they were saying what a tyrant I was and planning to poison me so that he could marry Patience. I became very angry then; but I didn't want to make a scene with *him*. I struck Patience a couple of times. All I did to *him* was ask him why he should want to kill me, but he was so much put out by that that be tried to murder me on the spot.'

Grandmother Jia, believing this farrago to be true, was naturally appalled.

'How dreadful! Bring the wretch here at once!'

But before the words were out of her mouth, Jia Lian him-self came running in, sword in hand, with a crowd pursuing at his heels.

Grandmother Jia had always treated Jia Lian and Xi-feng with indulgence, and on this occasion Jia Lian seemed to think that he could presume on this to riot in her presence with impunity, totally disregarding the fact that his mother and aunt were there as well. This deliberate flouting of their authority by a licensed favourite greatly incensed the two ladies. They seized hold of him with angry scoldings, one on either side.

'Disgusting creature ! Have you no sense of decency left whatever? Can't you see that Grandmother is here?'

'It's because Grandmother spoils her so much that she has become the way she is,' said Jia Lian, leering at them through bloodshot eyes.

Lady Xing, having at last succeeded in wresting the sw6rd from his grasp, shouted at him fiercely.

'Get out of here at once!'

But Jia Lian remained where he was and went on talking and talking in the same leering, disgusting manner, like a little boy who expects his naughtiness to be admired. Grandmother Jia, in a voice which shook with anger, uttered the only threat that she knew would shift him.

'I realize that *we* count for nothing with you. Fetch his father, some one, and see if he'll go then.'

At that Jia Lian finally shambled out. Sulkily avoiding the conjugal apartment, he took himself off to his study outside.

After he had gone, Lady Xing and Lady Wang turned on Xi-feng and began scolding her; but Grandmother Jia did what she could to comfort her by dismissing the incident as unimportant.

'Young men of his age are like hungry pussy-cats, my dear. There's simply no way of holding them. This sort of thing has always happened in big families like ours—certainly ever since *I can* remember. It's all my fault, anyway. I shouldn't have made you drink so much wine. It's all turned to vinegar inside you.'

This made everyone laugh.

'Don't worry,' she went on.' I'll see that he apologizes to you tomorrow. Just for tonight, though, so as not to put him *too* much out of countenance, I think you had better stay away from him.'

Her voice became harsher when she remembered Patience.

'Little wretch! I always thought she seemed such a nice girl. To think that underneath it all 8he should have been so wicked!'

You-shi laughed.

'There's nothing wrong with Patience. She just happened to be the person nearest at hand for Feng to work

off her spleen on. When Feng and Lian are angry with one another, they both take it out on Patience. The poor girl is terribly unjustly treated. Don't you go taking sides against her as well!'

'Oh well, that's all right;' said Grandmother Jia. 'I must say, she never struck me as a wily seductress. In that case, of course, I'm sorry for the poor child—bearing the brunt of it all when she is the innocent party.'

She called Amber to her.

'Amber, I want you to take a message to - Patience for me. Tell her—and I want you to make it quite clear that the message comes from me personally—that I know she has been unjustly treated and I shall make her mistress apologize to her tomorrow. Only tell her not to make a fuss about it today, because it is her mistress's birthday.'

*

Patience was at this time in Prospect Garden, whither she had been carried off at the earliest opportunity by Li Wan and where, as soon as they were indoors, she had collapse in a sobbing heap, resisting all attempts at lifting her. Bao-chai tried reasoning with her.

'Come, Patience, you are an intelligent girl. Think how well your mistress treats you normally. Just because she's got a bit drunk today and taken it out on you—why, it shows how close you are to each other! You wouldn't want her to take it out on anyone *else*, would you? Everyone else is laughing at her for being such a drunken silly. If you alone insist on—taking it so tragically, it will begin to look as if your reputation for good sense was undeserved.'

Just then Amber came in with the message from Grandmother Jia, and Patience, conscious of the aura of prestige it gave her, began gradually to perk up a bit. She remained in the Garden, however, and made no attempt to return to her mistress.

After she had sat with Patience and rested for a while, Li Wan, together with Bao-chai and the rest of the girls, went back to see Grandmother Jia and Xi-feng, whereupon Bao-yu invited Patience over to **Green** Delights. Aroma gave her an enthusiastic welcome.

'I'd like to have asked you here in the first place, but I saw that Mrs Zhu and the young ladies were taking care of you, so I didn't like to interfere.'

Patience's face was smiling as she thanked her, but fell again almost immediately.

'I can't understand it, I really can't. I'd done absolutely nothing to deserve such treatment.'

'Oh, it was a passing -fit of anger,' said Aroma. 'I don't suppose Mrs Lian knew what she was doing. Look how well she treats you normally.'

'I wasn't thinking so much of Mrs Lian,' said Patience. 'It's what that hateful woman said. Why should she want to amuse herself at my expense? And then for that stupid master of mine to go and beat me—!'

Once more the sense of injustice overcame her and she could not restrain her tears.

'Don't be upset, Patience!' said Bao-yu consolingly. 'I offer you an apology on their behalf'

Patience laughed.

'It has nothing to do with you.

'We're all cousins,' said Bao-yu. 'What one of us does concerns all the others. If they have done you an injury, it's up to me to apologize.'

He turned his attention to her appearance.

'What a pity! You've made your new dress all damp. Aroma's dresses are in here. Why don't you change into one of hers, then you can spray some samshoo on this one and iron it? You'll need to do your hair again as

well.'

He called to the junior maids to fetch water for washing and heat a flat-iron.

Up to this moment Patience had known only by hearsay of the remarkable understanding shown by Bao-yu in his dealings with girls. He had deliberately kept away from her in the past, knowing her to be Xi-feng's confidante and (he supposed) Jia Lian's cherished concubine. It had indeed been a source of frequent regret to him that he had been unable to show her how much he admired her. Seeing him like this for the first time, Patience reflected on the truth of what she bad heard.

'He really has thought of everything,' she told herself, as she watched Aroma open up a large chest—specially for her and select two scarcely worn garments from it for her to change into. Then, since the water had already arrived, she took off her own dress and skirt and quickly washed her face. Bao-yu, who stood by smiling while she washed, now urged her to put on some make-up.

'If you don't, it will look as if you are sulking,' he said 'After all, it *is* Feng's birthday, and Grandma *did* specially send someone to cheer you up.'

Inwardly acknowledging the reasonableness of this advice, Patience looked round her for some powder, but could not see any, whereupon Bao-yu darted over to the dressing-table and removed the lid from a box of Early Ming **blue**-and-white porcelain in which reposed the head of a white day my with five compact, stick like buds on either side of the stem. Pinching off one of these novel powder-containers, he handed it to Patience.

'There you are. This isn't ceruse, it's a powder made by crushing the seeds of garden-jalap and mixing them with perfume.'

Patience emptied the contents of the tiny phial on to her palm. All the qualities required by the most expert perfumers were there: lightness, whiteness with just the faintest tinge of rosiness, and fragrance. It spread smoothly and cleanly on the skin, imparting to it a soft bloom -that was quite unlike the harsh and somewhat livid whiteness associated with lead-based powders.

Then the rouge, too, was different—not in the usual sheets or tissues, but a tiny white-jade box filled with a **crimson** substance that looked like comfiture of roses.

'This is made from safflower, the same as ordinary rouge,' Bao-yu explained to her, 'only the stuff they sell in the shops is impure and its colour is inferior. This is made by squeezing the juice from the best quality safflower, carefully extracting all the impurities, mixing it with rose water, and then further purifying it by distillation. It's so concentrated that you need only a dab of it on the end of a hairpin to do your lips with and still have enough left over to dilute with water in the palms of your hands for using on your cheeks.'

Following his directions, .Patience found that her complexion had acquired a radiant freshness that she had never seen in it before. At the same time her whole face seemed to be bathed in the most delectable perfume.

Using a pair of bamboo scissors, Bao-yu now cut the twin blossoms from the stem of an autumn-flowering orchid that was growing in a pot and stuck them in Patience's hair.

At that very moment a maid arrived summoning her back to Li Wan's place and she had to leave him in a hurry.

Never before had Bao-yu been able to have Patience actually with him so that he could do things for her. She was such a superior sort of girl, so handsome, so intelligent, so different from the average run of common, insensitive creatures. His previous inability to serve her had been a source of deep regret.

Today was—or would have been if -she had lived—Golden's birthday, and for this reason be had been feeling miserable since early morning. The row which bad broken out later in the day between Xi-feng and Jia Lian had proved a godsend. It had at last given him an opportunity of showing Patience something of what he felt

for her. This was an unlooked-for happiness he might otherwise have waited a lifetime for in vain. He stretched himself out on his bed in a pleasurable glow of satisfaction.

These pleasant feelings were soon marred by the reflection that a coarse sensualist like Jia Lian who never considered anything but his own pleasure would certainly know nothing about the scientific preparation of cosmetics. He thought of Patience serving that precious couple, alone in the world without parents or brothers and sisters to defend her, somehow contriving to steer an even course between Jia Lian's boorishness on the one hand and Xi-feng's vindictiveness on the other, yet today, in spite of all her efforts, falling a victim to their cruelty. Truly her lot was an unhappy one -mote unhappy even than Dai-yu's!

At this point in his reflections he became so upset that he began to shed tears, not bothering on this occasion to restrain them, because Aroma was not there to disapprove. Getting up from his bed, he went over to inspect Patience's dress The samshoo that had been sprayed on it was now neatly dry. He picked up the iron, ironed the dress for her, and neatly folded it. Then he noticed that she had left her handkerchief behind. As it was still marked with tear-stains, he washed it out in the water she had used for her face and hung it up to dry. Feeling a strange sensation in which sadness and happiness commingled, he mused for some minutes in silence before going over to Sweet-rice Village to join the others. He remained there a long while talking. The lamps had already been lit when he returned.

*

As Patience spent that night at Li Wan's place and Xi-feng slept with Grandmother Jia, Jia Lian returned to his room in the evening to find it gloomy and deserted. Not caring to call for anyone, however, he managed for himself as hest he could and spent the night there alone. On waking next morning he felt nothing but revulsion and remorse when he remembered what had happened. His mother, Lady Xing, still worrying about the drunken exhibition he had made of himself the day before, came hurrying over first thing to urge him to go with her to see Grandmother Jia. This, despite the most acute feelings of shame and embarrassment, he now had to do.

'Well?' the old lady asked him, when he knelt before her.

'I had too much to drink yesterday, Grandmother, and I'm afraid I broke in on you and made a scene. I've come here now to apologize.'

Grandmother Jia snorted.

'Disgusting wretch! If you *must* go filling yourself with liquor, why can't you lie down quietly and sleep it off like a good, sensible creature? Fancy knocking your own wife about! Feng can normally hold her own against anyone—she's a regular little Tyrant King as a rule—but yesterday you'd reduced the poor child to a state of terror. Suppose I hadn't been here to protect her and you really had done her an injury, what would you have had to say for yourself then, I wonder?'

Though smarting under the ludicrous injustice of what she had just said, Jia Lian knew that he was in no position to argue, and humbly acknowledged his guilt.

'I should have thought that a couple of beauties like Feng and Patience would have been enough for you,' she went on. 'Why you should need to be forever sniffing after other skirts and bringing all this disgusting rag-tag and bob-tail back to your own room, I just do not understand. Fancy beating your own wife and your chamber-wife for a creature like that! And you a gentleman and member of a distinguished family! You ought to be thoroughly ashamed of yourself. if you have any consideration for my feelings at all, you'll get up off the floor now— because you are forgiven as far as *I* am concerned—and you'll apologize handsomely to that poor wife of

yours and take her back home with you. Otherwise you can just take yourself off, for I shan't accept your kotow!'

Jia Lian turned and looked at Xi-feng, standing at his grandmother's side. She was wearing none of her finery today, her eyes were swollen with weeping, and her face, pinched and **yellow** without its make-up, was pathetic and somehow more appealing than usual.

'I suppose I'd *better* apologize,' .he thought. 'It will help to patch things up between us; and it will please the old lady.'

Having so resolved, he looked up at Grandmother Jia with a smile.

'If that's what you want, Grandmother, I daren't disobey you. But it's going to make her even more willful than before.'

'Nonsense I' said Grandmother Jia, though not ill-humoredly. 'I know for a fact that she is a model of wifely behaviour. I am sure she would be quite incapable of deliberately giving offence. If she *does* ever give you any trouble, I shall see to it myself that she submits to your authority.'

Jia Lian got to his feet then, and clasping his hands in front of him, made a low bow to his wife.

'It was all my fault, Mrs Lian. Please forgive me.'

This was said in so droll a manner that everyone burst out laughing.

'Now you're not to be angry any more, Feng,' said Grandmother Jia, 'or *I* shall be angry with you!'

She ordered someone to fetch Patience, and told Jia Lian and Xi-feng that she would now expect them to make it up with *her*.

When Jia Lian saw Patience, he was even more ready to pocket his pride for her than he had been for Xi-feng.

There's no wife like a chamber-wife

as the saying goes, and before anyone else could say a word, he had bounded up to her and began apologizing.

'You were very badly treated yesterday, Patience. It was all my fault. It was because of me that Mrs Lian was so beastly to you. Apart from offering you my own apology, I'd like to apologize on her behalf as well.'

He clasped his hands again and bowed, once more provoking Grandmother Jia to laughter. This time Xi-feng laughed, too.

Grandmother Jia told Xi-feng that it was now her turn; but before she could do anything, Patience rushed up to her, threw herself at her feet and kotowed.

'I made you angry on your birthday, madam. I shall never forgive myself.'

Xi-feng was already feeling remorseful that in her previous day's drunkenness she had so far forgotten herself as to humiliate Patience, in spite of all they had always meant to each other, because of a mere chance-heard remark. Seeing her now so generous and so lacking in resentment, she was both ashamed and deeply touched. There were tears on her cheeks as she bent down and raised the girl to her feet.

'In all the years I've served you,' said Patience, 'you've never laid so much as a finger on me before. I bear you 'no grudge for striking me yesterday, madam. It was all that wicked woman's doing. I don't blame you in the least for losing your temper.'

She, too, was crying while she said this.

'See the three of them back to their room now,' said Grandmother Jia to her women. 'And if you hear another' *word* about this, let me know straight away who said it. I don't care who it is, I shall take a stick to them myself!'

The three of them now kotowed to Grandmother Jia, to Lady Xing and to Lady Wang; then the old nannies, bidden once mote to escort them, stepped forward with cries of obedience and conducted them back to their room.

As soon as the three of them were alone together, Xi-feng started on Jia Lian.

'Am I really such a hell-cat? Are you really so terribly henpecked? When that woman wished me dead, you agreed with her. Surely I can't be *all* that bad? Surely I must have *some* good days, even if it's only one in a thousand? You've made it seem as if I'm worse even than that worthless whore. How can I have the face to go on living now?'

She began to cry again.

'Aren't you satisfied yet?' said Jia Lian. 'Just think a bit: who was most to blame yesterday? Yet today *I* was the one who had to kneel down in front of everyone and apologize. You've come out of this pretty well. So what are you yammering at me now for? Do you want me to kneel down *again? Here?* It doesn't do to be *too* greedy, you know.'

Xi-feng, unable to think of a reply to this, fell silent. Patience giggled.

'There, it's all over!' said Jia Lian, laughing himself. 'It's no good. I just can't help myself.'

Just then a woman came to the door to report.

'Bao Er's wife has hanged herself.'

Jia Lian and Xi-feng were both profoundly shocked; but the look of fear on Xi-feng's face was of only momentary duration.

'Well,' she said harshly, 'what of it? Why make such a fuss about it?'

Shortly after this Lin Zhi-xiao's wife came in and spoke to Xi-feng on the side.

'Bao Er's -wife has hanged herself. Her family are talking about taking it to court.'

Xi-feng laughed scornfully.

'Good! I was thinking of doing the same thing myself.'

'I've just been trying to talk them out of it,' said Lin Zhi-xiao's wife. 'I tried frightening them a bit to start with, then I promised them some money if they would drop it. They seemed to be willing.'

'I've got no money to give them,' said Xi-feng, 'and I wouldn't give it to them if I had. Let them go ahead and sue. I don't want you to talk them out of it, *or* to try frightening them out of it either. Just let them go ahead and sue. If they lose their case, I shall bring a suit against them for *ex morte* blackmail!'

As she stood there in some perplexity to know what to do, Lin Zhi-xiao's wife noticed that Jia Lian was signaling to her with his eyes. She understood his meaning and went off to wait for him outside.

Jia Lian followed soon after.

'I'm just going out to have a look—see what's going on,' he said on his way out.

'You're not to give them any money I' Xi-feng shouted after him.

Jia Lian went straight off to discuss the matter with Lin Zhi-xiao himself. As a result of their discussion, someone was sent to haggle -with the family and promise whatever seemed necessary, and the family eventually agreed to keep quiet in return for a payment of two hundred taels 'towards funeral expenses'. Terrified that they might change their minds, Jia Lian sent someone to talk to the local magistrate and invited the police inspector and two or three of the constables in to 'help with the funeral'. Seeing the way things were, the family now dared not pursue the matter any further even if they wanted to, and were obliged to digest in silence whatever they might feel of grief or anger.

Jia Lian told Lin Zhi-xiao to account for the two hundred taels by adding a bit here and a bit there on to

various items in the Current Expenses account. He also slipped Bao Er some money of his own and consoled him with a promise that he would pick a good wife for him at the earliest opportunity to replace the one he had just lost. Flattered by all the attention he was receiving and grateful for the money, Bao Er was only too willing to do as he was told and continued to serve Jia Lian with no less devotion than before. But that is no part of our story.

Whatever internal uneasiness Xi-feng may have felt about these developments, outwardly she affected complete indifference. Finding herself alone with Patience when Jia Lian had gone, she smilingly inquired after her injuries.

I was terribly drunk yesterday,' she said. 'I hope you won't hold it against me, what I did then. Where did I hit you? Let me have a look.'

'You didn't hit me very hard,' said Patience.

Just at that moment they were interrupted by an announcement from outside.

'Mrs Zhu and the young ladies are here.'

If you want to know what they had come for, you will have to read the following chapter.

CHAPTER.45

Sisterly understanding finds expression in words of
sisterly frankness
And autumnal pluviousness is celebrated in verses of
autumnal melancholy

As we were saying at the end of the last chapter, Xi-feng had just begun expressing her concern for Patience when Li Wan and the cousins walked in. She broke off and invited them to be seated, and Patience went round and served them all with tea.

'What a crowd!' said Xi-feng. 'Anyone would think I'd sent out an invitation for something I'

'There are two things we wanted to see you about,' said Tan-chun. 'One is my affair; the other concerns Xi-chun but also includes instructions from Grandmother.'

'They must be very important things for a turn-out like this,' said Xi-feng.

'We started a poetry club recently,' said Tan-chun, 'and the very first time we had a regular meeting, somebody didn't turn up. As the rest of us are too soft to apply the rules ourselves, we want to invite you, as someone we could trust to apply them for us with iron impartiality, to be our Disciplinary Officer. That's the first thing. The second thing concerns this painting of the Garden that Xi-chun has been asked to do. There are all sorts of things she'll need for it that she hasn't got. We spoke to Grandmother about it and she said that there might still be some things that would do in the downstairs store-room at the back. She said we ought to have a look, and if there are, we can use *them.* Otherwise, anything we haven't got ourselves we should send outside for and buy.'

'I know nothing about poetry,' said Xi-feng. 'I couldn't compose a poem to save my life. I could come along to eat and drink with you if you like.'

'You wouldn't have to compose poems,' said Tan-chum 'That's not what we want you for. All you have to do is keep an eye on the rest of us, and if you find anyone slacking or playing truant, decide how they ought to be punished.'

'Don't try to fool me,' said Xi-feng. 'I've already guessed. It's not iron impartiality you're after, it's financial

backing. If you've got a club, you're sure to have some arrangement for taking it in turns to pay the bill, and as you're short of money, you've thought of this as a means of roping me in so that you can get some out of *me*. That's the real reason for your invitation, isn't it?'

The others laughed.

'Too bad! You've guessed.'

'You're like the original Crystal Man, Feng,' said Li Wan.

'A heart of crystal in a body of glass.

You can see through everything!'

'Fancy!' said Xi-feng, mockingly. 'The respected elder sister-in-law! The one who's put in charge of these young ladies to guide their studies and teach them needlework and good manners! You encourage them to start a poetry dub, but as soon as the question of money arises (and incidentally, how much money is involved?—it can't surely be very much), you're not interested: it has nothing to do with you! Now, you have a monthly allowance of ten taels. Excluding Grandmother and Aunt Wang - and they are, after all, ladies of rank and title—that's twice as much as any of the rest of us gets. Yet Grandma and Auntie go on about how poor you are: "poor young widow I" "no means of her own!,' Oh yes, and be-cause you've got a son, you get another ten taels a month on top of that, which actually makes you equal with Grandma and Auntie Wang. *And* you've got your land in the Garden, the best plot there. It's down in the tithe-book for the highest tithing. And you haven't got a big establishment. I doubt there are ten of you there altogether, counting you and Lan and all the servants, so your outgoings can't come to very much. And in any case your food and clothing is all found out of common funds. If one were to add it all up together, I think your real income must be somewhere in the region of four or five hundred taels a year. Even if you were to spend one or two hundred a year out of that on amusements for the girls like this poetry thing, it wouldn't be for many years. Another year or two from now and they'll all be getting married. And it's not as if you were saving up for their dowries, either. That's hardly likely to *be your* responsibility. No, you're frightened of spending that money of yours, that's why you've set these girls on to me. I'm supposed to go along like an innocent and eat and drink myself silly so that next day *I* can be made to foot the bill. That's your little game, isn't it?'

'Listen to her, all of you!' said Li Wan, laughing. 'I make a single, inoffensive remark to her, and in return I get this *cart-load* of ill-bred' abuse! Really, Feng, what a mercenary creature you are! You're just like one of those muddy-legged wretches who stand haggling in the market-place with a little abacus up one sleeve to do their calculations on. It's a good job you were born a girl and brought up in an educated, upper-class family and that you married into a family of the same sort. If you'd been born a boy and your family had been poor and un-educated people, I dread to think what sort of a calculating monster you would have grown up into! Everyone in the world has to become the object of your calculations. Yesterday it was Patience's turn. It's a wonder you have arms to strike her with, for I'm sure it was a dog's stomach you poured all that wine into. None but a dog would have turned on Patience the way you did. I tell you, I was so angry, I felt like coming straight over and giving you a piece of my mind. Then I thought it over for a bit and decided not to. After all, it was your birthday, and as we know, "every dog must have his day". Also I was afraid that if I made a fuss I might upset Grandmother. And because I didn't have it out with you yesterday, I was still feeling angry about it when I came here to see you just now. Yet you have the gall to start on *me*—you who aren't worthy to pick up Patience's shoes! You ought to change places, you two. I'm sure Patience would make the better mistress.'

It made the girls laugh to hear Li Wan speaking with such unaccustomed heat.

‘Oh, now I understand!’ said Xi-feng, joining in their laughter. ‘It wasn’t about poetry or painting that you came to see me: it was revenge for Patience you were after. I didn’t realize that she had so powerful a protector. Now that I do, I shall never dare to strike her again—not if all the devils in hell are tugging at my elbow! Here, Patience! *Miss* Patience! Let me apologize to you in front of Mrs Zhu and the young ladies. I “did evil in my cups”. Please forgive me.’

The others laughed.

‘There you are!’ said Li Wan to Patience. ‘I told you I’d stick up for you, didn’t I?’

‘It’s all very well for you ladies to joke about it,’ said Patience, ‘but you make me feel very. uncomfortable.’

‘You’ve no cause to feel uncomfortable,’ said Li Wan. ‘I’ll look after you. You just get that key and tell your mistress to unlock the store-room and find those things for us.’

‘My dear good Wan, *please* take these girls back to the Garden,’ said Xi-feng. ‘I’ve got the rice accounts to go over; I’ve got to see Lady Xing about something (1 don’t know what, but she’s just sent over to say that she wants me); and I’ve got the New Year’s clothes to see about. I have to find out what everyone wants and get the orders placed—’

‘I don’t care in the least about these things,’ said Li Wan airily. ‘You just settle my business first so that I can go back home and rest and not have these girls pestering me any more.’

‘Give me a little *time!’* said Xi-feng pleadingly. ‘You’re so considerate towards me as a rule; I don’t know why I’m so Out of favour with you today. I suppose it must be because of Patience. Often in the past you’ve said to me, “Now I know how busy you are, Feng, but your health is important: you ought to find means somehow or other of taking a rest.” That’s what you would normally say in a situation like this; but today you seem more intent on driving me into an early grave! Incidentally, you may not think it matters very much if the arrangements for *other* people’s winter clothing get put off, but what about the clothing for the girls? Strictly speaking that’s *your* responsibility. Don’t you think Grandmother would feel that you were taking non-interference just a *little* far if she discovered that the girls were going without winter clothes simply for want of a word from you? You know, of course, that I would rather get into trouble myself than involve *you* in trouble...’

‘Listen to her, *all* of you,’ said *Li Wan.* ‘Marvellous, isn’t it? I’d like to get hold of that clever tongue of yours, Feng, and—! Just tell me this one thing, then: *are* you going to keep an eye on our poetry club for us or *aren’t* you?’

‘What a question!’ said Xi-feng. ‘If I refused to join your club and spend my money in it, I should be declaring myself in open rebellion against the Prospect Garden Residents’ Association, and heaven help me then!—my life wouldn’t be worth living! I shall be round first thing tomorrow to report for duty, and the first thing I shall do will he to pay down fifty taels to be spent as and when you wish on the club’s entertainment. I can t write poetry—or anything else, for that matter—and I’m a very common, ignorant sort of person to be joining a poetry club; and as for taking on this disciplinary business: well, whether I do or whether I don’t, I don’t suppose there’ll be much danger of your expelling me once you’ve seen the colour of my money.’

The others laughed.

‘I’ll open the store-room presently,’ she continued, ‘and I’ll get them to put out anything that looks as if it might be of use for you to have a look at. If you can use it, keep it. Anything you’re still short of after that, I’ll tell them to buy for you outside. I can get the pongee cut for you straight away. The architect’s drawing isn’t at Lady Wang’s, by the way; it’s at Cousin Zhen’s place. I’m telling you this to save you a wasted journey. I can get it for you, if you like; then I can have it taken with the pongee to Sir Zheng’s gentlemen and ask them to do the sizing for you.’

Li Wan nodded approvingly.

'That would be very kind. If you'll really do all that for us, we shall have nothing more to say. Come on then, everybody I Let's go home and see what happens. If she *doesn't* send the stuff we can come back and deal with her later.'

She began to leave the room as she said this, the cousins following in her wake.

'I know of only one person who could have stirred all this up,' said Xi-feng as they were going, 'and that's Bao-yu.'

The mention of his name stopped Li Wan in her tracks. She came back into the room.

'I'd completely forgotten: it was Bao-yu that I came about in the first place. He was the one who failed to turn up at our first meeting. We're all too soft to know what to do with him. How do *you* think we ought to punish him ?'

Xi-feng thought for a bit.

'The only thing I can suggest is that you should make him go round to each of your apartments in turn and sweep the floors for you.

'Yes, yes,' said the others, laughing. 'The very thing!'

They were just about to leave for the second time when Lai Da's mother, old Mrs Lai, came in, leaning on the shoulder of a little maid. Xi-feng and the rest rose to greet her. They begged her to be seated and offered her their congratulations. The old woman sat down on the edge of the kang and smiled round at them with pleasure.

'The way I see it, since you are our employers, *our* good fortune is *really yours.* If it weren't for your family, how would the likes of us ever have come by a piece of good fortune like this in the first place? Yesterday when you sent young Sunshine round with those presents, my grandson "kotowed upwards". in the doorway to show his gratitude.'

'When will he be leaving to take up his post?' said Li Wan. Old Mrs Lai sighed, as though the thought made her melancholy.

'Oh, I don't concern myself with their affairs. I just let them get on with it. When he came round to me to kotow the other day, I didn't have a good word for him. I said to him, "Young man, don't tell me you're a mandarin now, because it's just plain ridiculous. Thirty years it is since you were born," I said, "and all that time, in actual fact, you've :been a bondservant. Yet through the kindness of our Masters you were set apart from the moment you came out of your mother's womb. Thanks to the Masters and your parents," I said, "you were taught to read and write like a gentleman's son and fussed over by a parcel of maids and nannies and wet-nurses as if you was some sort of young phoenix. I doubt you know how the word 'bondservant' is written. You've known nothing but soft living since you were born," I said. "You don't know the bitterness your father and your grandfather had to go through. You don't appreciate the generations of hardship that went into the making of a fine gentleman like you. And the money they spent on you," I said' "nursing you through all the fevers and calamities of youth (for you were a sickly, ailing child): it would have been enough to have made you anew out of silver Then, when you were twenty, the Master, out of the kindness of his heart, undertook to buy you a place in the Service, so that your future would be assured. Think how many freeborn members of the clan go hungry," I said, "yet be did this fox you, that was born a slave. Such great fortune should make you fearful. And now, after ten years of fooling around, you've talked the Master—by what jiggery-pokery I do not know -into getting you selected for a posting. A district magistrate may not be very high in the scale," I said, "but the mandarin who goes to a district to be its magistrate is supposed to be the father and mother of all the people who live there. So mind you don't go getting above yourself," I said. "Do all in your power to show that you are worthy of the trust. And always let the Master see how much you appreciate what he has done for you. Otherwise Heaven will surely cast you off.'

Li Wan and Xi-feng both laughed.

'You worry too much, Mrs Lai,' said Xi-feng. 'He's all right. It's true we don't see much of him nowadays. He used to come in once in a while, but these last few years all we've seen of him has been his visiting-card at New Years and birthdays. He did come in the other day, however, to kotow to Her Old Ladyship and Lady Wang. We saw him in Hei Old Ladyship's courtyard, dressed in his new uniform. He looked very imposing. A little bit fatter than he used to be. You ought to be happy now that he's a mandarin, not making yourself miserable with all this worrying about him. Even if he *doesn't* behave himself, I should leave his parents to do the wolrying. All *you* have to do now is sit back and enjoy your-self. If ever you're at a loose end, you can always jump in your chair and have yourself carried round here for a game of cards and a chat with Her Old Ladyship. I'm sure no one here would dream of making you feel uncomfortable. After all, you've got upstairs and downstairs and halls and reception-rooms back home just the same as we have. You're as good as any lady in the land now, you know. I'm sure you will be respected as such.'

Mrs Lai hurriedly rose to her feet as Patience came up to pour tea for her.

'You shouldn't do that, miss. You should let one of the younger ones do it. 'Tain't right you should pour for me.' Sitting down again she continued to hold forth between sips.

'You don't know that boy, Mrs Lian. He's like all young people: you have to be strict with them all the time. Even then if you're not careful they'll somehow find a way to raise the devil and grieve their parents' hearts. This young chap of ours now: those that know him realize it's just the mischief coming out, but those who don't are liable to think that he's taking advantage of the fact that he's got more money and influence than other people to throw his weight about; and that reflects badly on the Master's reputation as well. Oh, I get so angry about it sometimes, I don't know what to do with myself. I have to call his Dad in and give him a good talking-to and then I feels a bit better. I hope you won't mind my saying this'—she pointed a finger at Bao-yu - 'but I wouldn't have thought that your father was strict enough with you. Look at the way Her Old Ladyship was out in front the moment he started when he gave you that beating a while ago. You should have seen the way your grandfather used to lay into *him* when *he* was a lad. And your father wasn't the scapegrace that you are, either. Then there was your father's elder brother, Master She. Now he *was* mischievous—though even so, he didn't turn the whole household upsy-downsy the way you seem to. *He* was *always* getting beaten. Oh, and the way your Cousin Zhen's grandfather over at the Ning-guo used to lay into *his* son! Oh, he had a fiery temper! Once it was up—well, you'd never have thought it was his son he was beating. Looked more like he was torturing a bandit. From what I've seen and beard, I should imagine that the way your Cousin Zhen at the Ning-guo disciplines *his* son is in his grandfather's tradition. Only trouble is, he's a bit too erratic. Can't control himself, that's his trouble. I don't blame the young ones for not respecting him. If you're sensible, young man, you'll be glad to hear me say this; otherwise, though you may be too polite to say so, I expect you'll think I'm an interfering old woman.'

Just then Lai Da's wife came in, followed almost immediately by the wives of Zhou Rui and Zhang Cai. The latter two had come to report to Xi-feng on various domestic matters. Xi-feng smilingly inquired of Lai Da's wife whether she had come to collect her mother-in-law.

'Well, no, madam, not exactly,' said Lai Da's wife. 'I really came to find out whether you and the young ladies will be favouring us with your presence or not.'

'Oh, how silly of me!' said old Mrs Lai when she heard this. 'Here have I been talking a load of stale old sesame and all the time forgetting the one thing I came here to ask you about! On account of our young chap's posting, all our friends and relations want to get together and celebrate, so we thought we'd better have a reception. Well, the way I saw it, if we only held it for one day, it would mean inviting some people and leaving out others, and

that wouldn't seem right. So I thought about it for a bit, and I thought to myself, well, it's thanks to the Masters that this great honour has come our way, so we must do what we can to show our appreciation. Even if it means spending every penny we've got, we ought to be glad to do it. So I told the boy's father to arrange a reception for three days running. On the first day we'll have some tables and a stage in our little bit of garden at the back to entertain Her Old Ladyship and Their Ladyships and your good selves and the young ladies, and some more tables and a stage with another lot of players in the reception room at the front where we can entertain the gentlemen. The second day will be a reception for relations and friends of the family, and the third day will be for colleagues on the staffs of the two mansions. I do hope you will honour us with a visit. It will be the highlight of our celebrations.'

Li Wan and Xi-feng asked her when the reception would be, assuring her that they fully intended to come.

'I'm sure Lady Jia would love to come too,' they said, 'but I wouldn't bank on her being able to.'

'The date we've chosen is the fourteenth,' said Lai Da's wife hurriedly, before her mother-in4aw had a chance to get under way again. 'We do hope you'll come, for Mother's sake.'

'I can't answer for the others,' said Xi-feng amiably, 'but *I* shall definitely be coming. I'd better warn you, though: I haven't got any present to bring, and you mustn't expect me to offer largesse—I wouldn't know how to go about it. *You* mustn't laugh if I just eat up and go.'

'Get along with you, madam!' said Lai Da's wife, laughing. 'If you feel like bringing a largesse, twenty or thirty thousand taels would do very nicely!'

Old Mrs Lai laughed.

'I been to see Her Old Ladyship already and she says she'll come. Reckon I ought to feel pretty pleased with myself.'

After further exhortations to attend the party and various other admonishments, the old woman was at last getting up to go when her eye chanced to fall on Zhou Rui's wife and she seemed to remember something.

'There's something else I wanted to ask you about, Mrs Lian. What's all this about Zhou's boy being dismissed? What did he do wrong?'

'Ah yes, I've been meaning to speak to your daughter-in-law about it,' said Xi-feng, 'but there were so many other things to think about that they drove it from my mind. Lai, dear,'—she turned to Lai Da's wife—'when you get back, will you tell your husband that neither of our households will be employing Zhou Rui's son any longer and that he is to send him packing?'

Lai Da's wife could only agree, but the unhappy mother fell on her knees in supplication.

'What did he do?' old Mrs Lai repeated. 'Tell me what he did, and I'll be judge for you.'

'Yesterday on my birthday,' said Xi-feng, 'before the rest of us had even started drinking, he was already drunk, and when my grandmother sent her women round with some presents, instead of going out and being nice to them, he sat where he was swearing at everybody and made no attempt to receive the presents or take them inside. Eventually the two women came in by themselves and he did at last go with a couple of the pages to take in what they had brought. But though the pages made no trouble, this young Zhou dropped the box he was carrying and scattered wheat-cakes all over the courtyard. After the women had gone, I sent Sunshine out to give him a talking-to, but it ended up with *him* shouting and swearing at Sunshine. Faced with a young hooligan like that who is so utterly and completely uncontrollable, I don't see that one has any choice but to dismiss him.'

'Is *that* all it was?' said Grannie Lai. 'And I was thinking it must have been something serious! Take my advice, Mrs Lian. If that boy's done wrong, beat him and curse him and tell him to mend his ways, but dismiss him?—no, that would never do. He's not like one of your house-born servants. The Zhous came with Her Ladyship from her

old home when she was married. If you insist on dismissing him, it will look like an affront to Her Ladyship. Give him a few whacks to learn him and tell him not to do it again; but keep him on, whatever you do. If you won't do it for his ma's sake, do it for Her Ladyship's.'

Xi-feng turned to Lai Da's wife.

'Very well then. Let him be called for tomorrow and given forty strokes with the heavy bamboo. And tell him he's not to drink any more.'

Lai Da's wife said she would see that done. After that Zhou Rui's wife kotowed to Xi-feng in gratitude. She wanted to kotow to Mrs Lai as well, but the old woman reached forward and prevented her. The four women then left, and Li Wan and the girls went back into the Garden.

Towards evening Xi-feng sent someone to the store-room, as promised, to hunt out any old painting gear that had been stored there and take it round for Bao-chai and the others to look over. On doing so the girls found only about half the things they wanted, and made a list of the other half which they gave to Xi-feng to have bought. But these are matters about which it is not necessary to go into detail.

Suffice it to say that the freshly-sized pongee arrived back from outside in due course together with a rough draft of the projected painting, and that Bao-yu began to spend a part of each. day at Xi-chun's place helping her. Tan-chun, Li Wan, Ying-chun and Bao-chai developed the habit of dropping into sit with them while they worked, partly to watch the painting and partly because it made a convenient rendezvous.

Reminded by the first nip in the air that the hours of darkness were gradually lengthening, Bao-chai went round for a long consultation with her mother from which she came away with quantities of extra sewing to occupy herself with in the evenings; but since, when making her morning and evening calls on Lady Wang and Grandmother Jia, she would often, if they seemed desirous of her company, spend a considerable while sitting and talking with them, and since she was also in the habit of dropping in from time to time to gossip with one or another of her cousins in the Garden, she had very little leisure for sewing in the daytime and as a consequence was invariably plying her needle under the lamp until eleven or twelve o'clock at night.

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As for Dai-yu, twice every year, following the spring and autumn equinoxes, she suffered from a recurrence of her old sickness. This autumn the repeated junketings occasioned by Grandmother *Jia's* enthusiastic excursions into the Garden had drained her of energy. Recently she had begun coughing again; and as this year it seemed to be considerably worse than usual, she had stopped going out altogether and stayed at home nursing herself in her room. Sometimes when she was feeling depressed she would long for a visit from one of the girls and the distraction of someone to talk to. But when Bao-chai or one of the others did in fact look in to ask how she was, she would grow fidgety after only a few sentences had been exchanged between them and begin to wish that they would go. The others realized that it was being ill that made her like this; and knowing from past experience how hypersensitive she was, they were never sharp with her, even if she was somewhat remiss as a hostess and often lacking in courtesy.

Once when Bao-chai called in to see her, the nature of her illness became the subject of their conversation.

'I suppose the doctors in attendance on this family aren't too bad as doctors go,' said Bao-chai, 'but the medicines they prescribe for you don't seem to make you any better. Don't you think it's time they called in someone really first-rate who could cure this sickness once and for all? Every year all through the spring and summer you have this trouble; yet you're not an old lady, and you're not a little girl any longer. You can't go on

in this way indefinitely.'

'It's no good,' said Dai-yu. 'This illness will never go away completely. Look what I'm like ordinarily, even when I'm not ill.'

Bao-chai nodded.

'Exactly I You know the old saying: "He that eats shall live"? What you ordinarily eat, when you're not ill, doesn't seem to nourish you or build up your resistance. That's one of your troubles.'

Dai-yu sighed.

> 'Life and death are as Heaven decrees; and rank
> and riches are as Heaven bestows them.

These things are not in human power to command. I seem to be worse this year than I have been in previous years.'

She coughed several times while she was saying this.

'I was looking the other day it that prescription of yours,' said Bao-chai. 'I should have said myself that there was too much cinnamon and ginseng in it. I know they are supposed to build you up; but you don't want to go overheating yourself. If you ask me, I think the first, most important thing to do is to calm your liver and strengthen your stomach a bit. If you could reduce the inflamed, over-active state of your liver so that it was no longer harming the earthy humour of your spleen, your stomach would begin functioning normally again and then the food you ate could begin to nourish you properly. First thing every morning you ought to take an ounce of the best quality bird's nest and five drams of sugar-candy and heat them up in a silver skillet until they make a sort of syrup. If you were to take that regularly, it would do you more good than medicine. There's nothing like it for building you up if you have low vitality.'

Dai-yu sighed again.

'You're such a kind person,' she said, 'but I've got such a

> suspicious nature that in the past I always suspected that your kindness was a cloak for something and rejected it. It wasn't until the other day, when you told me off for reading forbidden books and offered me all that good advice, that I ever felt really grateful to you. I realized then that I had all along been wrong about you— right from the very start. I suddenly realized: I'm fifteen this year and have no brothers or sisters: ever since my m6ther died there has been no one—literally no one - who has ever spoken to me in that sort of way. I'm not surprised Cousin Yun speaks so highly of you. I used to hate it when I heard her praise your kindness, but since experiencing it myself, I know what she means. If it had been you who'd said those things in the drinking game, *I* should have been quite merciless. I should never have kept quiet about it at the time and gently remonstrated about it later, when we were alone together, as you did I knew from that that I had been wrong about you,

and that you must really care for me. If my eyes hadn't been opened for me then, I should never be talking to you like this today.

'Now about this bird's nest syrup you want me to take. I know bird's nest is fairly easy to come by, but this illness of mine is something I suffer from every year because of my weak constitution. There's nothing particularly serious about it, it's just something that I always get. Yet already everyone's put to a huge amount of inconvenience because of it, fetching doctors, brewing medicines, buying ginseng for me and Saigon cinnamon. If I now come up with some fancy new idea like asking to have bird's nest syrup made for me every day, then even though Grandmother and Aunt Wang and Cousin Feng may not say anything, the old nannies and maids on the staff are sure to resent the extra work. Cousin Bao and Cousin Feng are Grandma's favourites, yet you should see the looks these people give *them* sometimes and you should hear the things they say about them behind their backs! So you can imagine what they must be like about *me*. I'm not even a proper member of the family: I'm just a refugee, with no family of my own, living here as a hanger-on. That in itself is enough to make them resent me. It's difficult enough for? me as it is, without deliberately thinking up new ways to make them hate me.'

'I'm just as much an outsider as you are,' said Bao-chai.

'There's no comparison between us;' said Dai-yu. 'You've got your mother and your brother for a start. You've got property and businesses. You've still got land and a home of your own back in Nanking. It's true that as marriage-relations they allow you to live here free of charge, but you provide everything for yourselves apart from the accommodation. You don't cost them a penny. And anytime you feel like it, you can just get up and go. I've got nothing at all of my own, absolutely nothing. Yet everything they give me—food. clothing, pocket-money, even the flowers and trees in my garden -are the same as they give their own gifts. Can you wonder that the servants are so resentful ?'

'Your being here only means one more dowry for them to find,' said Bao-chai. 'Surely so small an extra expense as that is hardly going to bother them?'

Dai-yu coloured.

'I've been telling you my troubles because I thought you really cared, but you turn them into a joke.'

'Perhaps,' said Bao-chai, smiling. 'But it's true, all the same. However, don't you worry: as long as I'm here, I promise to do my best to make it easier for you. If you will promise always to let me know when anything is bothering you, I will promise to deal with it if it is in my power to do so. I have a brother, it's true; but you know as well as I do what *he's* like. It's really only in having a mother that I can count myself a bit luckier than you. In other respects we have enough in common to think of ourselves as fellow-sufferers. If you can see this—as with your intelligence I am sure you must—you have no cause to go echoing Si-ma Niu's complaint: "All men have brothers, only I have none.' Now, you have suggested that "the less trouble the better" ought to be your motto here, and I take your point. I shall have a word with Mother next time I see her about this. I'll be surprised if we haven't got some bird's nest of our own at home. If we have, I shall tell them to send you a few ounces, so that you can get your own maids to prepare it for you every morning. That way will be handier for you and will also avoid the risk of any alarms and excursions with the staff.'

Dai-yu smiled at her gratefully.

It may be only a little thing, but it is very kind indeed of you to have thought of it.'

'Nonsense!' said Bao-chai. 'It's not worth speaking of. I'm only afraid that by spending so much time with other people I may have been neglecting you rather. Well, I'd better be going now. I'm afraid I'm tiring you.'

‘Come again this evening and talk to me for a bit,’ said Dai-yu.
Bao-chai promised to do so and departed.
And at this point she departs for a little while from our narrative.

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Left alone, Dai-yu ate a few mouthfuls of congee and then lay down on her bed.
Towards sundown a change of weather came, bringing the whisper and rustle of rain. It was the pulsing, steady rain of autumn, so constant that you sometimes wonder if it has stopped. The afternoon slid imperceptibly into a somber evening, blackened by lowering rain clouds and made yet more melancholy for Dai-yu by the persistent drip of the rain on her bamboos. Reflecting that Bao-chai would now be unable to come, she picked up a book at random to read beneath the lamp.
It was a volume of *The Lyric Miscellany* consisting largely of songs of sorrow and separation: ‘The Autumn Bride’, ‘The Grief of Parting’ and suchlike. Moved by what she read, she was inevitably drawn to give outlet to her feelings in composition and had soon completed a ‘song of separation ‘of her own. As she had modelled it on Zhang Ruo-xu’s famous poem ‘Spring River: A Night of Flowers and Moonlight’, she decided to call it ‘Autumn Window: A Night of Wind and Rain’. This is how it went:

Autumn Window: A Night of Wind and Rain

The autumn flowers are dead, the leaves are sere;
Lamp-light comes soon, the nights grow long again.
Outside my window autumn’s signs appear
More dismal in the wind and rustling rain.

The rustling rain came in such swift downpour
It startled me from autumn-dream-filled sleep.
Now, in a muse, unable to sleep more,
I watch the candle at my bedside weep.

The candle weeps down to its socket low,
And my heart weeps and desolation feels.
Yet the same wind in other courts must blow;
The sound of rain through other windows steals.

The wind’s chill strikes through quilt and counterpane,
The rain drums like a mad clock in my ears,
All night, in whispering, monotone refrain,
Companion to my own swift-coursing tears.

The courtyard now with mist begins to fill,
The bamboo’s drip persists without a pause.

When will the wind cease and the rain be still,
That with its weeping soaks my window's gauze?

Having read it over to herself out loud, she laid down the writing-brush and was about to go back to bed and settle down for the night when one of her maids announced the arrival of Master Bao'. Almost simultaneously with this announcement, Bao-yu himself burst in wearing a rain-cape and an enormous rain-hat of woven bamboo. Dai-ya laughed at the spectacle he presented.

'The Old Fisherman! Where have you just sprung from?'

'How are you today?' Bao-yu asked her anxiously. 'Have you had your medicine? How much have you managed to eat today?'

He was divesting himself of the rain-clothes while he asked these questions. When he had disposed of them, he picked up the lamp from the table and, shielding it with one hand to throw the light on her scrutinized her face. He appeared to be satisfied with what he saw.

You've got a better culour today.'

Now that he had taken off the rain-clothes, Dai-yu could see what he was wearing underneath. He had on a somewhat worn-looking tunic of **red** silk damask tied with a **green** sash at the waist, and trousers of sprigged **green** silk. The ends of his trousers were stuffed into socks extravagantly patterned with a design of flowers picked out in gold, and there were flowers and butterflies embroidered on his satin slippers.

'The top part of you seems to have been pretty well protected against the rain,' said Dai-yu, 'but what about the bottom part? Still, you appear to have kept your feet dry.'

'This is a complete outfit I've been wearing,' said Bao-yu. 'There is a pair of pear-wood patterns that go with it as well, but I left them outside on your verandah.'

Dai-yu looked again at the cape and rain-hat. Both were exquisitely made—quite unlike those that are sold in the market.

'What sort of straw is this cape made of?' she asked him. 'It's so fine. I can see now why you didn't look like a hedgehog in it as people usually do in these things.'

'The whole outfit was given to me by the Prince of Beijing;' said Bao-yu. 'It's exactly like the one he wears himself at home when it rains. If you like it, I'll get-you one the same. There's nothing so very special about it really. The hat's rather fun. The centre part is detachable. If you want to wear it in winter when it's snowing, you undo this little bamboo fastener and the whole top comes out, leaving you with just the brim. So when it snows, it can be worn by a woman just as-well as by a man. I'll get you a hat like this to wear in winter when it snows.'

'I don't want one, thank you,' said Dai-yu laughing. 'If I were to wear one of those, I should look like one of those old fisherwomen you see in plays and paintings.'

Immediately after saying this she realized that she had virtually been offering herself as a fishwife to Bao-yu's old fisherman and wished the -remark unsaid. She blushed with embarrassment and leaned forwards, racked with coughing, over the table. But Bao-yu appeared not to have noticed. What drew his attention was the poem be had just spotted which lay on the table beside her. He picked it up and read it. A murmur of praise which escaped involuntarily from his lips at once brought Dai-yu to her feet. She snatched the paper from him and burned it over the lamp. But Bao-yu only laughed.

'Too late! I've already memorized it.'

'I want to, go to bed now,' said Dai-yu. 'Please go now. Come again tomorrow.'

Hearing her speak of bed, Bao-yu felt inside his tunic and pulled out a gold watch about the size of a walnut

which he proceeded to inspect. The hand was pointing exactly midway between the sign of the Dog and the sign of the Pig: nine o'clock at night.

'Yes,' he said, stuffing the watch hurriedly back into his tunic. 'Time for bed. I've tired you long enough.'

He put on his cape and his rain hat and went out, but was back again almost immediately.

'Is there anything you fancy to eat? Let me know if there is, and I'll tell Grandmother first thing tomorrow. It will be safer to tell me than trying to explain what you want to the old women.'

Dai-yu smiled.

'I'll-think about it during the night and let you know first thing tomorrow. Listen: it's raining harder. You'd better go quickly. Have you got anyone with you?'

'Yes,' one of the did women standing outside on the verandah called into her. 'We're waiting with our umbrellas up and we've got the lantern ready.'

'Lantern?' said Dai-yu. 'In this weather?'

'The rain makes no difference,' said Bao-yu. 'It's a horn lantern. They're not affected by rain.'

Dai-yu reached out and took down a lamp with a balloon shaped glass shade from the top of her bookcase. She ordered one of the maids to light a little candle in it and offered it to Bao-yu.

'Take this. It's brighter than a horn one, and it's specially made for going out in the rain with.'

'I've got one like that myself,' said Bao-yu, 'hut I didn't bring it because I was afraid they might trip over and break it.'

'Which is worse,' said Dai-yu, 'a broken lamp or a broken leg? You're not used to wearing patterns, so it's important to see where you're going. The others can carry the horn lantern in front of you, and you can carry this glass lamp, which is handier and brighter and specially made for going out in the rain with, yourself. There. You can send it back to me tomorrow. And if you *should* break it well, it won't be the end of the world. What has made you of all people so parsimonious about *things* all of a sudden ? You're as bad as the Persian with his pearl!'

Thus persuaded, Bao-yu took the lamp from her and set off, two old nannies with umbrellas and a horn lantern in front of him and two little maids with umbrellas bringing up the rear. He made one of the little maids hold the glass lamp Dai-yu had given him and leaned on her shoulder until they were back home.

The departure of Bao-yu and his party was immediately followed by the arrival of two old women from Allspice Court, also carrying lanterns and umbrellas, with a large packet of bird's nest and another packet containing little frosty star-shapes of dazzling white imported sugar.

You'll find these a hit better than the stuff you can buy in the shops,' they told Dai-yu. 'Our young lady says this is to be getting on with and when you've finished it she'll send you some more.'

'That's very kind,' said Dai-yu. 'Won't you sit outside with the girls and let them give you some tea?'

'We won't, miss, thank you all the same,' they said. 'We've got other things to do.'

'Ah yes, you're busy,' said Dai-yu, smiling. 'I should have remembered. Now that it's getting colder and the nights are longer, I expect you will have started your card-school again. Nothing like a little gambling to pass the long night hours I'

The women laughed good-humouredly.

'I won't deceive you, miss,' said one of them, evidently the chief organizer. 'I've got a really nice little school going this year. There are always a few of us on night-duty, you see, and we don't like to risk falling asleep and missing our watch, so we find our little card-school the best answer. It keeps us awake and, as you say, miss, it helps to pass the time. Tonight it's my turn to be banker. The Garden gate has been closed now, so it's time we

got started.'

Dai-yu laughed.

'Well, all I can say is that it's very nice of you to have taken time off when you could have been winning money, to go out in the rain and bring me these things.' She turned to one of her maids: 'Give them a few hundred cash so that they can buy some wine to warm themselves up with after the rain.'

The women thanked her delightedly, and having kotowed, hurried outside to collect the money, after which they put up their umbrellas again and departed.

Nightingale first put away the bird's nest and sugar and then, having moved the lamp over to the bedside and let-down the blinds, helped Dai-yu into bed.

As she lay there alone, Dai-yu's thoughts turned to Bao-chai, at first with gratitude, because of her kindness, but afterwards a trifle enviously, because Bao-chai had a mother and brother and she had none. Then she began thinking about Bao-yu and herself: how they had been such good friends to start with, but how later on suspicion and misunderstanding had grown up between them. Then she listened to the insistent rustle of the rain on the bamboos and plantains outside her window. The coldness penetrated the curtains of her bed. Almost without noticing it she had begun to cry. It was nearly three in the morning before she was properly asleep.

We leave her now, to continue our story in the following chapter.

CHAPTER 46

An awkward person is given an awkward mission
And a faithful maid vows faithfulness unto death

IT was not, we observed in the last chapter, until nearly three o'clock in the morning that Dai-yu finally dropped off to sleep. We leave her at this point in our narrative and return to Xi-feng, who, it will be remembered, had been summoned on business of an unspecified nature by Lady Xing.

When the others had left, Xi-feng hurriedly changed into her going out apparel, got into her carriage, and drove round to the establishment next door.

The air of mystery surrounding this summons persisted after her arrival. Lady Xing dismissed the others who had been present and addressed her daughter-in-law conspiratorially.

'The reason I have sent for you is that Sir She has entrusted me with a matter of some delicacy which I hardly know how to go about and I thought I had better discuss it first with you. He has taken a fancy to Lady Jia's maid Faithful and wants her for his concubine; and he has given *me* the job of asking Lady Jia for her. As I see it, there is nothing very unusual in such a request, but I am rather afraid that Lady Jia may refuse and wondered if you had any bright ideas on how one ought to go about this business.'

Xi-feng put on what she hoped was a disarming smile.

'I don't think it's worth trying. I think it would be merely asking for trouble. Without Faithful, Grandma would be completely lost; she'd *never* consent to give her up. In any case, she's often remarked, in private conversation about Father, that she can't understand why at his age he continues to surround himself with young girls—"wasting their young lives" she calls it. She says it's not good for his health, and that he ought to save up his energies for his job and not fritter them away on "drinking all day with his fancy women". You wouldn't derive much pleasure from hearing this sort of thing said to your face, Mother, and I am very sure that Father

wouldn't. Yet if you *insist* on approaching Grandma about this, I'm afraid that that's what will happen. It will be like poking a straw up a tiger's nostril. I hope you won't be offended, but I'm afraid *I* daren't approach her about this. I should only be demonstrating my own powerlessness to help and making a lot of unpleasantness for myself into the bargain. Father is inclined to be a bit ga-ga at times nowadays. It's up to you to talk him out of it, Mother. This sort of thing is all very well in a younger man, but in someone of Father's years, with children and grandchildren of his own, it is really too shaming I'

Lady Xing sniffed.

'Lots of men in well-to-do families like ours have *troops* of concubines. Why should it be so shameful only in our case? Anyway, I don't know what makes you think he'd listen to *me*, even if I *did* try to talk him out of it. And even if Lady Jia *is* so attached to Faithful, she may not find it *all* that easy to refuse when the person asking is an eldest son with a grey beard who has held a position in the Government. Incidentally, I only asked you over here for your opinion. I don't see why you should have to start reading me a lecture. There was never any question of asking you to approach Lady Jia *for* me: I shall naturally undertake that task myself. And as for complaining that I haven't tried talking Father out of this obviously you have no conception of what his temper can be like. I *did* try to dissuade him, but he started hollering at me almost before the words were out of my mouth.'

Xi-feng knew that her mother-in-law was a weak and silly woman, always willing, for the sake of a quiet life, to fall in with her husband's wishes. Apart from pleasing her husband, her principal aim in life was to see how much she could squeeze out of the domestic economy and diver? into her personal savings. Decisions both great and small she left to him; but all household monies passed through *her* hands, and she saw to it that they suffered a considerable diminution in the process. The reason she gave for this pillage was Jia She's extravagance. 'I have to economize,' she would say, 'to make up for what Sir She wastes.' Among the children and servants of the household there was not one whom she trusted or whose advice she would listen to. From the tone of what she had just heard, Xi-feng knew that her mother-in-law's obstinate streak had been aroused and that it would now be quite useless to reason with her. She therefore smiled even more disarmingly and promptly changed her tack.

'Of course. You are right, Mother. I haven't had enough experience to be able to judge these matters. But now I come to think of it, it's only natural that a mother should give what she treasures to her own son. Who else would Grandma give her favourite maid—or any other precious thing—to if not to Father? One shouldn't believe everything that people say about other people behind their backs. No, I can see that now. I have been too credulous. One has only to think how you and Father are with Lian. Many a time when Lian has done something he shouldn't have done, you and Father have spoken as if you could hardly wait to lay your hands on him, but when he eventually turned up, you have forgiven everything and ended up by giving him some treasured possession. I've no doubt that in this case it will turn out in exactly the same sort of way with Grandma and Father. As a matter of fact, Grandma is in rather a good mood today, so if you are going to ask her, it would probably be best to do so straight away. Let me go over first to keep her sweet for you. I'll find some excuse for leaving and taking the others with me when you arrive. That will give you a good opportunity for raising this matter. If she says yes, that will, of course, be splendid. But even if she doesn't, no great harm will have been done, because no one else will know about it.'

Hearing what she wanted to hear, Lady Xing's good humour returned and she proceeded to tell Xi-feng what she had already decided to do.

'Actually my idea is *not* to mention this to Lady Jia at first. I think I shall begin by having a quiet word with Faithful herself. Though she may be bashful, as long as she doesn't say anything against it when I've explained it all to her, I shall

know that as far as *she* is concerned it is all right. If I talk to Lady Jia *then*, though she may be unwilling to part with her, she won't be able to get over the fact that Faithful herself is willing to leave. "There's no holding someone who has a mind to go," as they say. I think there should be no difficulty.'

'Trust you for sound planning, Mother!' said Xi-feng. 'That way sounds fool-proof. After all, every one of these girls is ambitious—they all want to improve their position and get on in the world—and it's unthinkable that she should throw away this chance of becoming almost a mistress in order to remain a maid and end up marrying one of the grooms.

'Exactly!' said Lady Xing. 'That's exactly what I thought. Any of these senior maids would give her ears for a chance like this. Anyway, you go over now—only don't breathe a word of this to anyone else!—and I'll follow later on, when I've had my dinner.'

Xi-feng reflected.

'Faithful's no fool,' she thought. 'Whatever Mother says, it's far from certain that she'll accept. Suppose I *do* go first and Mother follows later. If Faithful says yes, all well and good; but if she *doesn't*, Mother has such a suspicious nature that she's sure to think it's because I've blabbed and been encouraging the girl to play hard to get. It will be humiliating for her to discover that my prediction was right, and that will make her angry; and then she'll take it out on *me*—which won't be very amusing. It would be better if we went over together; then, whether Faithful accepts or not, no suspicion can possibly fall on me.'

'Just now as I was on the point of coming over,' she said, bringing these reflections to a rapid conclusion, 'two crates of quails arrived from my aunt's. I told the servants to fry them, intending to send them over later for your dinner. Then, on my way in through your gate, I met some of the boys from here with your carriage. They said it had something wrong with it and they were taking it outside to be mended. Why not make use of *my* carriage instead? We can go over together in it now, and you can dine at my place afterwards on the quails.'

Finding this proposal acceptable, Lady Xing called in her maids to help her change; then, supported by her ever-solicitous daughter-in-law, she got into the latter's carriage and drove with her to the establishment next door. On their way Xi-feng pointed out that if they arrived at Grandmother Jia's place together, the old lady might notice her outdoor clothes and ask her where she had been.

'It would be better if you went in there alone, while I slip back to my own place to change,' she said. 'I'll join you later, as soon as I've got into my everyday clothes.'

Lady Xing thought that this sounded reasonable and went in on her own to see Grandmother Jia. After chatting with her for a few minutes about nothing in particular, she left on the pretext of visiting Lady Wang. This meant that she went out through the rear of the apartment, so that her way took her past Faithful's room and she was able to look in casually in passing to see if she was there.

Faithful was sitting in her room sewing, but stood up as Lady Xing entered.

'What's that you're embroidering?' Lady Xing asked her. 'Let me look.'

She took the embroidery from her hand and inspected it.

'You are getting very good,' she said, laying it down again, and proceeded to scrutinize the girl carefully, from head to foot.

Faithful had on an almost new lilac-coloured dress of silk damask over which she wore a dag-edged sleeveless black satin jacket. Her skirt was a pale eau de Nil. Lady Xing observed the slender waist and elegantly sloping shoulders, the oval face, the lustrous, raven-black hair, the slightly aquiline nose, the cheeks slightly spotted with a few tiny moles. Faithful grew embarrassed and apprehensive beneath this scrutiny.

'What brings Your Ladyship here at this hour?' she asked. 'You don't often come over in the afternoon.'

Lady Xing made a sign to the maids who had accompanied her to leave the room, then, seating herself in Faithful's place, she took the maid by the hand and smiled at her graciously.

'I've come to wish you joy, my dear.'

Hearing this, Faithful was able to guess, more or less, what her visitor had come about. She coloured and hung her head in silence while Lady Xing continued.

'You see, Sir She has no one nowadays he feels he can really rely on. He was thinking of buying someone; but you know, you can never trust those girls you get from the dealers. You don't know how clean they are, and often you don't find out what the snags are until it is too late. They seem all right when you buy them, but two or three days later you find them getting up to the most frightful antics. Well, then he thought he'd pick someone from among our house-born servants, but he lust couldn't seem to find anyone good enough. Either they weren't good-looking enough, or their looks were all right hut their characters wouldn't do, or whatever it was there was always *something* wrong with them. Anyway—to cut a long story short—after half a year's careful study, he has finally decided that *you* are the cream of the cream. In looks, in character, in behaviour he finds you perfect: gentle, reliable—in fact, all the things he is looking for in a girl. So he's decided to ask Lady Jia if he can have you for his concubine. Of course**,** *you* would get much better treatment than a newly bought girl from outside could expect. In your case we should put your hair back straight away and treat you as a proper chamber-wife. You would be 'Auntie' to the children and 'Mrs' to the maids. In fact, you would have practically the status of a mistress. Now I know you are an ambitious young woman. You know what they say: "True gold will find its price." In your case it's proved by the fact that Sir She has taken this fancy to you. Here is a chance of doing all those things you ever set your heart on doing. And if you have any enemies, you will be in a position now to make them look very silly. Now—come along with me and tell Her Old Ladyship all about it.,

She took Faithful's hand and made as if to go, but Faithful reddened and snatched her hand away. Lady Xing assumed that she did so from bashfulness.

'Come,' she said, 'there's no need to be bashful. You don't have to say anything yourself if you don't want to. just come with me and let me do the talking.'

But Faithful still hung her head and did not move.

'Surely,' said Lady Xing, when it became evident that Faithful was determined not to accompany her, 'surely you can't mean to *refuse* this offer? I must say, you'll be a very silly girl if you do. What, throw away the chance of becoming a lady in order to go on being a maid? if you do, then in two or three years time when they marry you off, it will only be to one of the boys, you know. You'll still be a slave just the same. Whereas if you come to live with us—well, you know my nature: I'm not a difficult person to get on with; and Sir She always treats his girls very nicely. And after you've been with him for a year or two, if you can bear him a child, you'll be on the same level as me: everyone in the household will have to jump to it when you give them orders. If you throw away an opportunity like this, you'll certainly live to regret it."

Faithful continued to hang her head and say nothing.

'You're such a lively person as a rule,' said Lady Xing.

'What's got hold of your tongue? is there any particular thing about this arrangement that doesn't suit you? Please let me know if there is, and I promise that it shall be altered.'

But Faithful still said nothing.

'Oh, I know what it is,' said Lady Xing. 'I expect you've got parents and don't like to say anything until you've heard from *them.* Why yes, very right and proper. I shall get in touch with your parents and no doubt you will be hearing from them in due course. Then anything you want to say, you will be able to say to them.'

With that she left, and went round to Xi-feng's apartment. Xi-feng had long since changed back into her ordinary clothes. As no one else was about, she had taken the opportunity of telling Patience about her interview with Lady Xing. Patience was amused, but shook her head doubtfully at Lady Xing's optimism.

'If you ask me, I think it's very uncertain. From the way she's always spoken in the past when we've been alone together, I should think she'll-refuse. Anyway, we'll just have to wait and see.'

'Lady Xing is sure to come here afterwards to talk about what happened,' said Xi-feng. 'If Faithful has accepted, it will be all right; but if Faithful *hasn't* accepted, she's not going to be in a very good mood, and it would embarrass her to have *you* here while she was telling me about it. You'd better order them to prepare some of those quails and a few other dishes to go with them so that I can offer her dinner when she arrives; but after you've done that, you'd better take yourself off for a bit and don't come hack until you think she's gone.'

Patience gave Xi-feng's instructions to the cook and then went off to enjoy herself in the Garden.

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When Lady Xing left, Faithful felt sure that she would go straight to Xi-feng's for consultation and that soon after that someone else would arrive and put the same question to her again. it seemed to her that the best way of avoiding this would be to decamp. She sought out Amber in order to give some cover to her exit.

'If Her Old Ladyship should ask for me, tell her that I'm not feeling well and couldn't eat any lunch today. Say I've gone to walk in the Garden for a bit and shall be back again shortly.'

Amber agreed to do this and Faithful went off to wander about in the Garden. While she -was doing so, she came by coincidence upon Patience doing exactly the same thing.

Seeing no one else but the two of them around, Patience felt no compunction in revealing her newly acquired knowledge.

'Look who's here!, she called out teasingly. Mrs Faithful!'

Faithful blushed bright **red.**

'I suppose you're in the plot against me too. Well, never mind. I'll be having it out with your mistress presently.'

Patience could see that Faithful was really angry, and regretted her foolish jibe. Taking her by the hand, she led her to some rocks beneath a stand of maple trees where they could sit down together, and proceeded to tell her all that Xi-feng had a few minutes earlier told *her*.

'Thank you,' said Faithful when she had finished. 'You and I at least are still friends. When I think of our set how many were we?—Aroma, Amber, Candida, Nightingale, Suncloud, Silver, Musk, Ebony, Kingfisher—she left to go with Miss Shi—Charmer and Golden—they both died—Snow**pink** that was dismissed—you and me—there must have been a dozen of us altogether: when we were young we always told each other everything and shared everything together; but now that we are older, the others all seem to go their different ways and just aren't interested. Not me, though: *I* haven't changed. I'm just the same as I always was. I don't have any secrets from any of you. Now listen: I'm telling you this now for you to remember—only don't go passing it on to your Mrs Lian. It's not just a question of not wanting to be his concubine. I wouldn't go to Sir She, not if Lady Xing had died and he sent matchmakers and witnesses and asked me to be his proper wife!'

Patience was about to answer when there was a laugh from behind the rocks on which they were sitting and a voice called out.

'What's this shameless boasting I hear? It's enough to set one's teeth on edge!'

Startled, the two of them rose to their feet and went to look behind the rockery to find out who it was. Aroma

emerged, laughing, as they did so.

‘What’s all this about? Tell me about it too.,

The three of them sat down on the rocks together and Patience retold all that she had just told Faithful.

‘Well!’ said Aroma when Patience had finished. ‘I suppose it’s not for someone in my place to say so, but what a *nasty* old man! Unless they’re downright misshapen, just about no one is safe from him.’

‘I can tell you a way out of this if you want to refuse,’ said Patience.

‘What?’ said Faithful.

‘Have a word with Her Old Ladyship and get her to tell him that she’s already given you to Mr Lian. That’ll cool his ardour.’

‘You too now?’ said Faithful angrily. ‘You’re a nice lot, I must say! It was your mistress who suggested that the other day. I *thought* we hadn’t heard the last of that.’

‘If you don’t want *either* of them,’ said Aroma, ‘then if you ask me I think your best plan would be to get her to tell him that she’s promised you to Master Bao. That would put him off *rig ht* away!’

Both embarrassed and-exasperated by these taunts, Faithful rounded on her tormentors with some heat.

‘You’re *rotten,* both of you, and I hope you both come to bad ends! I thought you were decent sorts who might try to comfort me in my trouble. But even if you don’t care, you might at least refrain from treating it as a joke. I suppose you think you don’t have to worry about *me* because your own futures are assured and each of you will end up as chamber wife to the person of your choice. Well, as I see it, things in this world don’t always -turn out the way you want them to. I wouldn’t be quite so cock-a-hoop if I were you. You might be in for some nasty shocks yourselves.’

The others saw that they had really rattled her and laughingly did their best to calm her down.

‘Now, now, Faithful, don’t take it so much to heart. We three have been like sisters ever since we were little girls. We were only teasing you a bit because there’s no one else around. Tell us what plan you’ve decided on, so that we shan’t be so worried about you;’

‘Plan?’ said Faithful. ‘I’ve got no plan. I just shan’t go to him and that’ll be the end of it.’

Patience shook her head.

‘I very much doubt if it will. You know what Sir She’s temper is like. It’s true that he can’t touch you as long as you’re with Her Old Ladyship; but you’re not going to be with her all your life, are you? You’ll have to leave in the end, and if you fall into his clutches *then,* you’ll be in real trouble.’

Faithful smiled grimly.

‘As long as Her Old Ladyship lives, I shall stay with Her Old Ladyship. And when all’s said and done, even when the old dear goes to her rest, there are still the years of mourning. There would be no question of his taking a concubine with his mother just dead. And by the time the period of mourning is over—well, anything might have happened. I’ll just have to wait and see. If I get really desperate, I can -always shave my hair off and become a nun; or failing that, there’s always suicide. I don’t mind going through life without a man. Glad to keep myself clean?

The other two tittered protestingly.

‘The things you say, Faithful! Have you no shame?’

‘There’s not much room left for shame when things have come to *this* pass,’ said Faithful. ‘Anyway, if you don’t believe me, just wait and see. Lady Xing said just now that she was going to see my parents about this. I wonder if she will. She’ll have to go all the way to Nanking if she does!’

‘Your parents are looking after the house in Nanking and can’t be fetched,’ said Patience, ‘but they can be got in

touch with eventually. And in any case, your elder brother and his wife are here. It's a pity you're a house-born servant and not on your own here like me and Aroma.'

'It makes no odds,' said Faithful. ' "You can take an ox to the water, but you can't make him drink." Just because I refuse him, he's not going to kill my parents!'

While she was talking, her sister-in-law appeared some distance from where they were sitting, walking in their direction.

'There you are!' said Aroma. 'They've evidently found that they can't get in touch with your parents, so they've already had a word with your sister-in-law.'

'That cow!' said Faithful. 'She's a regular camel-dealer, that one. She'd just *jump* at a thing like this!'

The 'cow' was already upon them, smiling all over her face.

'Ah, *here* you are, miss! I've looked for you everywhere. Come with me. I've got something to tell you.'

Patience and Aroma fussed round her, inviting her to sit with them on the rock.

'No, you young ladies sit down;' said the woman. 'I've got to have a word with our Faithful.'

'Is it really very urgent?' they asked her innocently. 'We've been playing "I spy". Can't it wait until we've finished guessing?'

'What is it?' said Faithful. 'Why not just tell me?'

'Come with me,' said her sister-in-law. 'I'll tell you over there. It's good news, anyway.'

'Oh, is it by any chance the thing Lady Xing was talking about?' said Faithful.

'There!' said her sister-in-law. 'You knew about it all the time! What were you having me on for? Now come on, hurry, and I'll tell you all the details. It's a wonderful, wonderful piece of news!'

Faithful stood up and spat hard and deliberately in her sister-in-law's face.

'Why don't you take your bloody trap out of here?' she shouted, pointing at her angrily. ' "Wonderful news" indeed! I suppose you've been studying the way families of maids who've become concubines can throw their weight about, so you just can't wait to push me into that fire. If I find favour, then of course you'll be the great lady and be able -to put on airs and throw your weight about too. If I don't, if I'm a failure—oh, you'll just draw your tortoise-head back into your tortoise-shell and leave me to get on with it. Whether I live or die, it will be all the same to you.

She began crying hysterically and had to be restrained and comforted by Patience and Aroma.

'Huh!' said her sister-in-law in an unsuccessful attempt to retrieve her ruffled dignity. 'Whether you're willing or not, you might at least be civil. Anyway, I don't see why you need drag other people into it. "One doesn't discuss short legs in front of a dwarf," they say. I make no comment on the nasty things you said about *me,* but what about these young ladies? *They've* done nothing to provoke you. This talk about concubines is not very nice for *them.'*

'Oh no!' said the two young ladies in question. 'She wasn't referring to us when she said -that. It's you who are dragging in other people. What makes you think that either of us has been chosen as a concubine? By whom? Even if we had been, neither of us has any family in this household to throw their weight about, so she can say what she likes on the subject:

there's no occasion for us to get worked up about it.'

'It's because I made her look silly,' said Faithful. 'She's trying to cover up by setting you two against me. Fortunately you are too intelligent to be taken in. I lost my temper just now and I'm afraid I didn't choose my words very carefully. She evidently thought she could take advantage of that.'

Faithful's sister-in-law was by now finding her situation so disagreeable that she removed herself from it by

walking away in a huff. Faithful herself was still extremely angry and for some time continued to hurl invectives at her retreating back; but Patience and Aroma reasoned with her, and gradually she began to calm down.

'Why were you hiding there just now?' Patience asked Aroma when Faithful's composure had been restored. 'It's funny that we didn't see you.'

'I'd been over to Miss Xi-chun's to see Master Bao,' said Aroma, 'but I got there a moment too late. They said he had just that minute left for home. I couldn't understand why in that case I hadn't run into him on the way, so I thought perhaps he might have gone to Miss Lin's; but just as I was going there to look for him, I met one of Miss Lin's people who said that he *wasn't* with her, so I began wondering if he might have gone out of the Garden altogether. Then just at that moment *you* came along from the direction I was looking in, so I slipped behind a tree and hid. When Faithful came, I slipped out from behind my tree and hid behind this rock. I could see you both sitting there talking, but your two pairs of eyes couldn't see me.

'And your *three* pairs of eyes couldn't see *me!' said a* mocking voice behind them.

The three girls jumped in surprise. When they turned to look, it was Bao-yu himself who walked out from behind the rock.

Aroma was the first to recover her voice.

You led me a nice dance!' she said. 'Where have you been all this time?'

'As I came out of Xi-chun's place, I could see you coming towards me,' said Bao-yu. 'I knew it must be me you had come for, so I hid .myself to give you a surprise. I watched you as you walked by with your head in the air. Then I watched you go into Xi-chun's courtyard. Then I saw you come out again. Then I saw you stop and ask someone something. It was terribly funny. I was hoping that you would eventually come by the place where I was hiding, so that I could pop out and make you jump. But then you started dodging around, and I could see that you were hiding from someone else and evidently planning to play the same trick on *them.* So I peeped out to see who it was and found that it was these two. Then I began gradually working my way round behind you, and when you stepped out and showed yourself, I slipped forward and hid in the place where you had been biding.'

'We'd better go behind and have another look,' said Patience. 'We'll probably find two more people hidden back there!'

'No, I think there really are no more now,-' said Bao-yu.

When she realized that Bao-yu must have heard everything that had been said, Faithful lay face downwards on the rock and pretended to be asleep. Bao-yu laughed at her and gave her a little prod.

'It's damp on that stone. Much better come indoors if you want to lie down.'

He tried to pull her up, at the same time inviting Patience to accompany them back home for some tea. When Patience and Aroma added their own coaxing to his, Faithful finally rose to her feet and the four of them went together to **Green** Delights.

Bao-yu had, indeed, heard everything from his hiding-place, and his concern for Faithful made him very unhappy. When they were back, he lay back silent on his bed worrying about it while the three girls laughed and chattered in the adjoining room.

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When Lady Xing asked Xi-feng about Faithful's parents, she learned that her father's name was Jin Cai and that he and her mother lived as caretakers at the Jia family mansion in Nanking and seldom came up to the capital.

'But she has an elder brother Jin Wen-xiang, who is one of Grandmother's buyers,' said Xi-feng, 'and her

sister-in-law is Grandmother's chief laundress.'

The laundress was duly summoned and Lady Xing carefully explained what was required of her. The woman was naturally delighted and went off in a great bustle of self-importance to look for Faithful, confident that she had only to state her mission for the matter to be successfully concluded. Ill prepared, therefore, for Faithful's acrimonious rebuff or the strictures of Patience and Aroma which followed it, she re-turned to Lady Xing to make her report in a state of angry mortification.

'It's no good, I'm afraid. She just swore at me.' Since Xi-feng was present, the woman dared not mention Patience, 'That Aroma was there, too, helping her. Some of the things she said to me—well, I wouldn't offend Your Ladyship's ears by repeating them. I think you and Sir She would be well advised to buy a girl elsewhere. That little fool Faithful evidently wasn't *meant* for such great fortune—nor we to share it, seemingly.'

'Whatever has this got to do with Aroma?' said Lady Xing. 'I wonder how she got to know about it.' She paused for a moment. 'Was there anyone else there?'

'Miss Patience was there,' said the woman.

'I wish you'd given her a box on the ears then and told her to come home,' Xi-feng put in hurriedly. 'She went oft wandering somewhere or other as soon as I left the house and there wasn't a sign of her when I got back. If *she* was there, she'll have put in her pennyworth too, I suppose.'

'Well, she wasn't exactly there,' said the woman, 'she was quite a way off. I couldn't see her very clearly. Maybe it wasn't her, I could have been mistaken.'

'Go and find her at once,' Xi-feng said to the servants. 'Tell her I'm back and Lady Xing is here and she is to come home immediately.'

Felicity hurried forward to report:

'Miss Lin sent round three to four times to ask if Patience would go over to *her* place, -so Patience went to see what she wanted. I went there to call her back when you came in just now, but Miss Lin said would I please tell you that she wants Patience a bit longer to do something for her.'

'She's *always* asking Patience to do things for her,' said Xi-feng, with pretended annoyance. 'I wonder what it is this time.

Resourceless, now that her plan had misfired, Lady Xing returned home as soon as she had eaten dinner and in the evening informed Jia She of what had happened. After reflecting for some moments, Jia She ordered Jia Lian to be summoned immediately.

'Jin Cai and his wife aren't the only couple looking after our Nanking property,' he began as soon as Jia Lian arrived. 'Have him recalled immediately.'

'Last time we had a letter from Nanking,' said Jia Lian, 'it said that Jin Cai was in a delirium and they'd already issued the money to buy his coffin. He may well be dead by now; and even if he isn't, he's probably unconscious and wouldn't be much use to us back here. And his old woman is as deaf as a post.

'Villain! Parricide!' Jia She shouted, in instant fury. 'Trust *you* to know that! Get out of my sight!'

Startled by his father's unaccountable anger, Jia Lian retreated in a hurry. Shortly after he had done so, Jin Wen-xiang was sent for.

Jia Lian, not daring either to go back home or to go in again to his father, stayed near at hand in his outer study, waiting to see what happened. After a while Jin Wen-xiang arrived, and Jia Lian watched him being conducted through the inner gate by the pages. After a lapse of time in which he could comfortably (had he been so minded) have eaten four or five meals, he saw Jin Wen-xiang come out again, but was still too scared to make inquiries. He did not do so until be had allowed what he thought was a safe interval to elapse after Jin Wen-xiang's

departure, and was then informed that his father had gone to bed. Only then did he dare to go back home; and it was not until Xi-feng informed him that night that he understood what it was all about.

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That night Faithful was unable to sleep. Her brother came next morning to ask Grandmother Jia if he could take his sister back home for the day. His request was granted, and Grandmother Jia ordered Faithful to get ready. Faithful did not want to go, but overcame her reluctance because she did not want the old lady to suspect that anything was amiss.

When they were -home, her brother told her all that Jia She had said, promising that if she accepted, her position would be an honoured one: she would become 'Mrs Jin', and all the household would look up to her. But no matter what he said, Faithful set her face firmly against it all and obstinately continued to say 'no'. In the end her brother had no alternative but to go back to Jia She and tell him that his sister was unwilling. Jia She was greatly incensed.

'Now look here,' he said, 'you go back and get your wife to tell her this: Sir She says:

The moon ever loved a young man.

He knows all about that saying. No doubt she thinks him too old for her and has set her heart on one of the younger ones Bao-yu, probably, or my son Lian. Tell her, if she has, the sooner she abandons hope in that direction the better, because if I can't have her, she may be very sure that no one else in this family will dare to. That's one thing. And here's another. She may think that because she's Lady Jia's favourite, she can look forward to marrying outside one day and becoming someone's regular wife. Well if so, just let her get this firmly into her mind: whoever or wherever she marries, she needn't think she will ever escape me. If she dies or is prepared to live all her life an old maid, I might admit myself beaten; but otherwise, never. So unless she proposes to choose one of those alternatives, she'd better hurry up and change her mind. It will be a great deal easier for her if she does.'

Each sentence of the above had been punctuated by a nervous 'Yessir' from Jin Wen-xiang. Jia She continued.

'Now don't think you can fool me over this in the hope of getting better terms. Tomorrow I shall send Lady Xing over to have a word with Faithful herself. If Faithful still refuses after your wife has spoken to her, then that is no fault of yours and I shan't hold it against you. But woe betide you if when Lady Xing talks to her she finds that she is willing!'

After a good many more 'Yessirs' Jin Wen-xiang withdrew and went back home. When he got back, he did not even wait to transmit Jia She's message through his wife, but went straight in and told it all to Faithful himself It made Faithful so angry that for some time afterwards she was unable to speak. Finally, after some inward calculation, she answered him as follows.

'Even if I *am* willing, you'll have to take me back first, so that I can have a word about it with Her Old Ladyship.'

Supposing this to mean that she had changed her mind, her brother and his wife were overjoyed, and the latter at once undertook to go with her to see Grandmother Jia.

It so happened that when they arrived, Lady Wang, Aunt Xue, Li Wan, Xi-feng, Bao-yu and the girls, and some of the senior stewardesses from outside were all - there with the old lady sharing a joke. Faithful led her

sister-in-law through their midst, knelt down at her mistress's feet, and with tears streaming down her face, proceeded to tell her what Lady Xing had said to her the day before, what her sister-in-law had said to her in the Garden, and what her elder brother had told her that morning.

'When I refused, Sir She said it was because I fancied Master Bao, or else because I was saving myself to marry someone outside. He said that even if I were to fly to the world's end, I should never as long as I live escape out of his clutches: sooner or later he'd have his revenge. But I've made my mind up, and I'm telling Your Ladyship here, in front of all these witnesses. I don't care whether it's Master Bao or Prince Bao or the Emperor Bao, I don't ever want to marry *anyone*. Even if Your Ladyship herself were to try and force me to, I'd rather cut my own throat than marry. I'll serve Your Ladyship until you leave this world for the next one; and when that day comes, I shan't go back to my brother and his wife; I shall either take my own life or I shall cut my hair off arid become a nun. And in case anyone should think I don't really mean this and am only saying it to get myself out of a corner, I call on heaven and earth and all the gods and the sun and moon to be my witness: if I don't honestly and sincerely mean every word I say, may I be struck with a quinsy this very moment and matter burst out of my mouth!'

She had hidden a pair of scissors up her sleeve before she came, and as she uttered this oath, she undid her hair with her left hand and began hacking away at it with the scissors in her tight. The servants rushed forward to stop her, but before they could lay hands on her, she had already cut off a large hank. It was fortunate that her hair was so thick and strong. Observing with relief that she had not succeeded in cutting through all of it, the servants wound up what remained and refastened it on her head.

By the time Faithful had finished speaking, Grandmother Jia was trembling all over with rage.

'I have only this one girl left that I can rely on,' she said, speaking half to herself, 'and now they are plotting to take her away from me.'

As she looked at those standing around her, her eye fastened upon Lady Wang.

'You deceive me, all of you. *You* who are outwardly so dutiful: you are secretly plotting against me like all the rest. Whenever I have any good thing you come and ask me for it. All my best people you take away from me. Now I have only this one poor girl left to me; and because you see that I am nice to her, it infuriates you—you can't *bear* it! And now you've found this means of getting her away from me, so that you can have me at your mercy.'

Lady Wang had risen to her feet as soon as Grandmother Jia addressed her, but dared not defend herself; Aunt Xue could not very well intervene when the object of these strictures was her elder sister; and Li Wan had hustled her young charges from the room at the first hint of impropriety when Faithful began her complaint.

Tan-chun, always one of the more thoughtful members of the family, realized that however unjust the accusation, Lady Wang was in no position to answer back. She realized that Aunt Xue could not speak up for her own sister or Bao-chai say anything when her mother was silent and that Li Wan, Xi-feng and Bao-yu were even more disqualified from coming to the rescue. This was exactly the sort of situation in which a young unmarried granddaughter could be useful. And since Ying-chun was too docile and Xi-chun too childish, Tan-chun herself, after listening for a while at the window, boldly stepped into the room and faced her grandmother with an intrepid smile.

'How can this matter have anything to do with Mother, Grandma? Can you think of *any* reason why a younger brother's wife should be consulted about her brother-in4aw's private business?'

Grandmother Jia was at once all smiles.

'Of course not, my dear. I am a silly old woman! Mrs Xue, you must try not to laugh at me. Your sister is a most

dutiful daughter-in-law: not like She's wife, who is so scared of her husband that she has no time for me - beyond what she does for form's sake. I have done your sister a very grave injustice.'

Aunt Xue murmured something in reply, afterwards adding as a politeness:

'The younger son's wife is often the more favoured one. Perhaps you are biased, Lady Jia.'

'No,' said Grandmother Jia firmly, 'I am *not* biased. Bao-yu,' she said, turning to her grandson, 'why didn't you speak up when I falsely accused your mother? How could you stand by like that and watch her being treated unjustly?'

'How could I take Mother's side against Uncle and Aunt?' said Bao-yu. 'Obviously *someone* was to blame; but if it wasn't Mother, who was I to say that it was? I could hardly have said that it was *me*. Somehow I don't think you would have believed me!'

Grandmother Jia laughed.

'Yes, I suppose you are right. Go and kneel down to your mother, then, Bao-yu. Tell her that I'm getting old and that she is not to be upset by what I said to her. Ask her to forgive me for your sake.'

Bao-yu quickly went over and knelt before Lady Wang. But before he could relay his grandmother's message, his mother had laughingly prevented him.

'Get up at once and don't be ridiculous, Bao-yu I How can you possibly apologize for Grandma to *me ?'*

Bao-yu hurriedly got up to his feet.

'What about *you,* Feng?' said Grandmother Jia. 'Why didn't you try to stop me?'

'I've been trying to restrain myself from blaming *you* for what's happened,' said Xi-feng. 'I don't know why you should pick on *me.'*

Grandmother Jia's laughter was echoed by the others present.

'Oh? Now this is interesting. I should like to know why you think *I'm* to blame for what has happened.'

'You shouldn't be so good at training your girls,' said Xi-feng. 'When you've brought up a beautiful young bulrush like Faithful, can you blame other people for wanting her? It's a good job I'm only your granddaughter-in-law. If I'd been your *grandson,* I should have asked you for her for myself a long time ago. I shouldn't have waited till now, *I* can tell you!'

'Oh,' said Grandmother Jia, laughing.' So it's all *my* fault, *is it?'*

'Of *course* it's your fault,' said Xi-feng.

'In that case I won't try to keep her,' said Grandmother Jia. 'You can take her back with you.'

'Not just now;' said Xi-feng. 'In my next life, perhaps. If a good girl in this life, I might be reborn as a man, and I can ask you for her then!'

'Go on, take her with you!' said Grandmother Jia. 'You can give her to your Lian. See if that shameless father-in-law of yours still wants her *then!'*

'Lian doesn't deserve her,' said Xi-feng. 'All he's fit for is a couple of sad old dumplings like me and Patience!'

This set everyone laughing.

A maid came in to announce someone.

'Lady Xing, ma'am.'

Lady Wang hurried out to meet her.

What followed will be revealed in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 47

In pursuit of love the Oaf King takes a fearful beating
And from fear of reprisal the Reluctant Playboy makes a hasty getaway

HEARING that Lady Xing had arrived, Lady Wang at once hurried out to meet her.

Lady Xing had come over to see if there had been any change in Faithful's attitude. She was ignorant of the fact that the secret was now out and that Grandmother Jia knew everything. The first she heard of it was when quietly informed by some of Grandmother Jia's women as she entered the old lady's courtyard. She would have liked to turn back, but by then it was already too late: she had already been seen and announced by the servants inside, and when her sister-in-law Lady Wang came out to meet her, she was obliged to go in with her and pay her respects to Grandmother Jia. Finding that her greetings were received by the old lady in stony silence, she was covered with shame and confusion.

By this time Xi-feng had slipped out on pretext of other business and Faithful had gone off to her own room to nurse her anger alone. Fearing that their presence might add to Lady Xing's embarrassment, Aunt Xue, Lady Wang and the rest also, one after another, withdrew. When she saw that she and Lady Xing were alone together, Grandmother Jia at last broke her silence.

'I hear you have been playing the matchmaker for your husband,' she said. 'I must congratulate you on your wifely virtue though I must say, I think that in this case you are carrying wifeliness a little far. You have children and grand-children of your own now: why should you be frightened of his temper still *at your* age? Yet they tell me that you positively encourage his excesses.

Lady Xing blushed **crimson** with embarrassment.

'I have tried several times to dissuade him, without success. I am sure you must realize that I have acted against my will in this matter.'

'You did what you were told, all the same,' said Grandmother Jia sharply. 'Would you do what you were told if he asked you to kill someone? Just reflect for a moment. There is only your sister-in-law, poor, simple soul—she is always ailing from something or other—to worry about the responsibilities of this household. It's true that she has Lian's wife to help her, hut *she* has so much to do that she hardly knows which way to turn—always "putting the rake down to pick up the broom". And I have to cut down on all my activities nowadays. So if there is ever anything that your sister-in-law and Feng have overlooked, Faithful is the only one left to make sure that my needs are attended to. She is a child who notices things. If she sees that I lack something, she will either ask for it herself or have a word with one of the other two and make sure that I get it. Think of all the hundreds and thousands of things there are to be done in this household. If I hadn't got Faithful, how could the other two *avoid* overlooking something once in a while? So what would you have me do *then?* Would you expect me to start worrying about all these things myself? Should I have to start calculating what I needed every day and go running off to the other two to ask them for it? Of all the girls I've ever had, Faithful is the only one left me now who is a bit older and more responsible than the rest—who understands my little ways and knows how I like things done. There's a genuine bond between us—for example, *she* would never take advantage of our relationship, as some girls would, to ask other people for clothes or money for herself. One consequence 6f this is that not only Feng and your sister-in-law, but everyone else in the household, from the highest down to the lowest, is able to trust her. It means that quite apart from the fact that *I* have someone I can rely on, Feng and -your sister-in-law are

saved a great deal of worry; because with a girl like that to look after me, *I* don't suffer when they occasionally forget something, and that keeps me in a good temper. If Faithful were to leave me now, who would you get for me to put in her place? And even if you could find such a jewel, she'd need to have a tongue in her head too. She'd be no use to me if she didn't have my Faithful's gift for expressing herself. As a matter of fact I've been thinking of sending someone round to your husband to tell him that if he would care to *buy* himself a girl, he'd be very welcome to do it with my money. I don't mind *if* it costs me eight thousand—*ten* thousand even—but if it's this girl of mine he wants, I'm afraid he can't have her. Tell *him* that if he wants to be a dutiful son, he'll be doing more for me by leaving me my Faithful, to serve me during the few years that yet remain, than if he were to come over and wait on me in person, morning, noon and night. It's turned out very conveniently, your coming over just now: you'll be able to take this message back to him yourself and I can be sure of its being properly delivered.'

She called for the servants.

'What's happened to everybody? We were just in the middle of a nice chat when suddenly everyone went away.'

The maids, with answering cries, went off to look for the others. Soon all had been reassembled except Aunt Xue, who showed some resistance to the summons.

'I've only just got back,' she said. 'What's the point of going out again?'

'Have a heart, Mrs Xue I' said the maid. 'Her Old Ladyship is in a passion. *If you* don't come, no one else will ever shift her out of it. If it's the walking that bothers you, I'll carry you there on my back I'

'Get along with you, little monkey I' said Aunt Xue, laughing. 'A few hard words won't hurt you.'

She went with the maid nevertheless. On her arrival she was cordially welcomed by Grandmother Jia.

'What shall we do?' said the old lady. 'Shall we play cards? Come and sit by me, Mrs Xue. You haven't had much practice. If the two of us sit together, there will be less chance of Feng confusing us.'

'Yes,' said Aunt Xue. 'You will have to keep an eye on my hand and help me out a bit. Is it to be just the four of us, or shall we have one or two more?'

'Just us four, surely?' said Lady Wang.

'No, let's have one mote,' said Xi-feng. 'It will make it more interesting.'

'Go and call Faithful, someone,' said Grandmother Jia. 'She can sit below me. Mrs Xue's eyesight isn't too good. Faithful will be able to keep an eye on *both* our hands.'

Xi-feng laughed.

'I know you can read and write,' she said to Tan-chun. 'I suppose you haven't learned how to tell fortunes too, by any chance ?'

'What a strange question!' said Tan-chun. 'You should be concentrating all your energies on winning some of Grandma's money, not thinking about having your fortune told.'

-'I thought you -might be able to tell me how much I'm going to *lose* today,' said Xi-feng. 'No question of *winning* anything. Look how Grandma's got me ambushed on every side before we've even started playing!'

Presently Faithful arrived and sat in the place below Grandmother Jia. Xi-feng sat below Faithful. A **red** blanket was spread over the table, the cards were shuffled, the players cut for deal, and the game began.

After they had been playing for some minutes, Faithful noticed that Grandmother Jia had a nearly full hand and only needed a Two of Coins to go out. She made a sign to Xi-feng, whose turn it was to discard. Xi-feng pretended to be in great doubt as to what she ought to play.

'I'm sure Aunt Xue is hanging on to the card I want. I'd better let her have *this* one, and then perhaps she'll part with it.

'I'm sure *I* haven't got anything you want,' said Aunt Xue,

‘I’d need to look at your hand before I believed that,’ said Xi-feng.

‘You’re very welcome to,’ said Aunt Xue, ‘Come on, now! Put that card down and let’s see what it is.’

Xi-feng laid the card down in front of Aunt Xue: Two of Coins.

‘It’s no good to me,’ said Aunt Xue, ‘but I’ve an idea your grandmother may be going out now.’

‘Oh, *no* I’ cried Xi-feng in mock dismay. ‘It’s a mistake. I didn’t mean to discard that one.’

But Grandmother Jia, with a crow of triumph, had already thrown down her cards.

‘You dare take that back! You shouldn’t make mistakes!’

‘I told you I needed a fortune-teller,’ said Xi-feng. ‘Well, I played the card, so I suppose I’ve no one but myself to blame.’

‘I should think so too!’ said Grandmother Jia. Give yourself a good hard slap on the face if you want to know where the fault lies!’ She turned to Aunt Xue. ‘You mustn’t think

I’m grasping, Mrs Xue. I don’t play for -the money; but I do so enjoy winning!’

‘Of course,’ said Aunt Xue. *‘No* one would be so idiotic as to suppose that you played for the money. Hearing this, Xi-feng, who had meanwhile been counting out the money she had lost, abruptly stopped, and threaded the coins back onto the string.

‘Right!’ she said, speaking to the others present. ‘That settles it! She doesn’t play for the money, she just enjoys winning. Well I am mean and grasping, I’m afraid, and when I lose, I like to know how much. But if that’s the way she feels, back it all goes again!’

When Grandmother Jia played cards it was her unvarying custom to let Faithful shuffle for her. She had been talking to Aunt Xue throughout Xi-feng’s bit of by play, but broke off when he became aware that Faithful had made no move. ‘Come child,’ she said. ‘You’re not too upset to shuffle for me, are you?’

Faithful took up the cards with a laugh. ‘No, only Mrs Lian hasn’t paid up yet.’

‘Oh, hasn’t she? ‘said Grandmother Jia. ‘She’ll be lucky if she gets away with *that!’* She called one of the junior maids to her. ‘Take that string of cash from in front of Mrs Lian and bring it here.’

The little maid did as she was bid -and laid the money on the table beside Grandmother Jia.

‘Please let me have it back,’ Xi-feng pleaded, ‘—so that I can give you the right amount.’ ‘Feng really *is* rather mean,’ said Aunt Xue jokingly. ‘It’s only a game, after all.’

Xi-feng stood up and, laying a hand on Aunt Xue’s arm, pointed out to her the wooden chest in which Grandmother Jia kept her money.

‘You see that, Aunt? I don’t know *how* much of my money has at one time or another found its way in there. Before I’ve been playing half an hour, my money in the chest begins calling to my money on the table to come and join it. All I have to do now is wait until it’s called it all in, then the game will be over and Grannie will be in a good temper again and I shall be able to go and get on with my work.’

By the time she had finished -saying this, Grandmother Jia and all the others present were laughing. They were still laughing when Patience, fearing that her mistress might have insufficient money by her, came in bringing another string of cash.

‘Don’t put it down in front of *me,’* Xi-feng told her. ‘Put it down beside Her Old Ladyship, so that all my money can go into the chest together. We don’t want the money in the chest to have to go through the -business of calling for it all over again.’

This made Grandmother Jia laugh so much that she scattered the cards she was holding all over the table.

‘Tear her mouth!’ she said to Faithful, giving her a playful push.

Patience laid the money down as she was bidden, and after laughing a while with the others, went out again. On

her way out of the courtyard she ran into Jia Lian, who was just about to enter the gate.

'Where's Lady Xing?' he asked her. 'Sir She has sent me to look for her.'

'She's been standing in there with Her Old Ladyship for the last half hour,' said Patience. She hasn't dared to move yet, but I dare say she'll get away as soon as she can. Her Old Ladyship has been in quite a tizzy this morning, but thanks to the Mistress, who's been all this time humouring her, she's gradually beginning to calm down a bit.'

'Oh well, when I go in I shall say that I've come to find out if Her Old Ladyship is going to Lai Da's place on the fourteenth, so that I know whether or not to have the carriages ready,' said Jia Lian. 'I can mention that Lady Xing is wanted as an afterthought. And after that perhaps I shall stay on and chaff the old lady a bit for a few minutes. That should he all right, shouldn't it?'

'If you're asking my opinion, I think you'd do much better not to go in at all,' said Patience. *'Everyone's* been in trouble with her today even Her Ladyship and Bao-yu. If you go in now, you'll walk straight into it.'

'Oh, surely it's all over now, isn't it?' said Jia Lian. 'Surely she's not going to start all over again? It's nothing to do with *me,* in any case. And Sir She did ask me to go and fetch Mother myself. If he finds that I've sent someone else to do it, he's in such a bad temper already, that he'll probably use that as an excuse to take it out on *me.'*

He began to go in, and Patience, to whom this sounded reasonable enough, turned back and followed him in across the courtyard. Entering Grandmother Jia's outer door, Jia Lian crossed the reception room on tiptoe and peered into the inner room at the back. He could see his mother standing there.

Xi-feng, who had sharper eyes than the rest, spotted him at once and made a sign to him not to enter and another sign to Lady Xing indicating that she was wanted outside. Lady Xing could not simply walk out, so she filled a cup with some tea and set it down in front of Grandmother Jia. This caused the old lady to turn round; and as Jia Lian chanced at that very moment to be looking in at the doorway and was unable to withdraw his head in time, she caught a momentary

glimpse of him before he disappeared.

'Who's that outside?' she said. 'It looked like one of the boys peeping in there just now.'

'Yes' said Xi-feng, quickly rising to her feet and going over to the doorway, 'I thought I saw someone's shadow there just now.'

Jia Lian walked smiling into the room.

'I've come to ask if you are going on the fourteenth, Grandma, so, that I shall know whether to get the carriages ready or not.

'In that case why didn't you come in straight away,' said Grandmother Jia, 'instead of lurking around outside?'

'I could see that you were playing cards,' said Jia Lian with a somewhat artificial smile. 'I didn't like to interrupt you. I was hoping to get my wife to come out so that I could ask *her.'*

'And what is there so extraordinarily urgent about this that you needed to ask her now?' said Grandmother Jia. 'If you'd waited until she got home, you could have asked her all you wanted to then. Why this extraordinary conscientiousness all of a sudden? Eavesdropping is what you were up to more likely, or spying for somebody else. Whatever it was, you gave me a nasty turn, creeping around in that sneaky, underhand way. Disgusting creature! Your wife will be with me a long time yet playing cards. Better get back to that Zhao Er woman while you have the chance and carry on where you left off with your plans- for poisoning her!'

The others all laughed.

'It was *Bao* Er's wife, my old love, not *Zhao* Er's,' said Faithful, laughing.

‘That’s what I said, didn’t I?’ Grandmother Jia snapped. ‘Well, “Zhao” or “Bao” or brown cow how can !be expected to remember such things? The very mention of them makes me feel angry. There were three generations of the family above me when I came to this household as a young bride, and now there are three generations below me, and I’ve seen many shocking and many wicked and many peculiar things during the fifty-four years since first I came here, but this sort of thing is simply outside my experience. Now be off with you!’

Jia Lian bolted, not daring to say a word. Patience, who had been standing meanwhile outside the window, quietly mocked him as he came out:

‘I told you so, but you wouldn’t listen. You walked straight into the net, didn’t you?’

Just at that moment Lady Xing came out.

‘This is all Father’s doing,’ said Jia Lian. ‘Now *we* have to face the consequences.’

‘Unfilial wretch I’ said Lady Xing. ‘Some people would *die* for their fathers, *but you*—a few harmless words and you are already whining and complaining. What’s the matter with you? You haven’t been hurt yet—though I should look out, if I were you: Father’s been pretty angry these *last* few days.’

‘Come on, you must hurry back, Mother,’ said *Jia* Lian. ‘He sent me to fetch you a long time ago.’

He saw his mother out of the main part of the mansion and round to Jia She’s quarters next door. Lady Xing then gave her husband, in briefest possible outline, a report of what had happened; and since it was now evident that nothing more could be done about Faithful, Jia She had to put up with his mortification as best he could. He did, however, from that day onwards, discontinue all duty calls on his mother on the pretext of being ill. Lady Xing and Jia Lian were sent to make the mandatory calls on her in his stead.

Meanwhile his agents scoured the market for likely girls. A suitable one was eventually purchased for the sum of five hundred taels a seventeen-year-old girl called Carmine, who was duly installed in his room. But that is another part of our story.

The card-game continued until dinner-time, and it was not until after dinner that the company finally broke up.

Of the day or two which followed these events our story preserves no record.

*

The fourteenth came. Before *it* was yet daylight, Lai Da’s wife came round once more to renew her invitation. Grandmother Jia responded enthusiastically and, taking Lady Wang, Aunt Xue and the young people along with her, spent a considerable part of the day in the Lai family’s private garden.

Lai Da’s garden was not, of course, to be compared with Prospect Garden; nevertheless it was spacious and well-made and among its pools, rocks, trees and pavilions were to be found several features of striking interest or beauty.

The menfolk who were gathered in the reception hall at the front or ‘outer’ part of the establishment included Xue Pan, Cousin Zhen, Jia Lian, Jia Rong and a number of the more closely related members of the Jia clan outside the immediate family. Jia She was conspicuously absent. Young Lai had also invited some of his office holding colleagues and a few young men of good family as congenial company for the Jias.

One of these last was a young gentleman called Liu Xianglian whom Xue Pan had met on some previous occasion and hankeringly remembered ever since. The discovery that he was a keen amateur actor one, moreover, who specialized in romantic roles had led Xue Pan to jump to the wrong conclusion and assume that he must share the same ‘wind and moonlight’ proclivities as himself. Eager to make his closer acquaintance but hitherto denied any opportunity of doing so, he was overjoyed at finding him among the company on this occasion and

consequently in a state of excitement which rendered his behaviour extremely unpredictable.

Cousin Zhen had also heard of Liu Xiang-lian and admired him. Today, under pretext of being a little drunk, he had taken the liberty of asking him to perform for them, and Liu Xiang-lian, supported by the hired professional players, had obliged by appearing on the stage in two operatic numbers. When he rejoined the company, Xue Pan took the opportunity of moving over to his table and began plying him with all sorts of questions and insinuations.

Liu Xiang-lian was a young man of excellent family who, having lost both his parents in early youth, had failed to complete his education. He was of a dashing, impulsive nature, impatient of niceties. His chief pleasures were exercising with spear or sabre, drinking, and gambling; but he was not averse to gentler pastimes: he frequented the budding groves and could play on both the flute and the zither. Because he was so young and handsome, many who did not know him mistakenly supposed that, being an actor, he must have the usual actor's propensities. Lai Da's son Lai Shang-rong had been a good friend of his for years and it was only natural that he should invite him on this occasion to help him entertain his guests. Under these circumstances Lin Xiang-lian was prepared to put up with a certain amount of drunken horse-play; but Xue Pan was too much for him, and soon his attentions were becoming so distasteful that Xiang-lian resolved

-to leave at the earliest opportunity in -order to escape from them. Before he could break away, however, Lai Shang-rong detained him.

'Bao-yu gave me a message for you just now. He said that though he saw you briefly when he arrived, with so many other people around, be didn't have a chance of talking to you properly. He's most anxious that you should stay on so that he can talk to you afterwards. If you are really set on going, wait while I call him out and you can have a word with him now. What you do after that is your own affair: I certainly shan't try to detain you.' He called a waiter to him: 'Look inside and get hold of one of the old women. Tell her to have a quiet word with Master Bao to say that he's wanted here outside.'

After about the time it would take to drink a cup of tea in, Bao-yu appeared.

'Here you are, Uncle Bao!' said Lai Shang-rong when he had joined them. 'I leave Xiang-lian in your bands, I've got to go and look after my guests now.'

With that he left them.

Taking Xiang-lian by the hand, Bao-yu led him into a study at the side of the hall where they sat down together.

'Have you visited Qin Zhong's grave recently?' said Bao-yu.

'Certainly I have,' said Xiang-lian. 'The other day I was out hawking with a few of the others and happened to notice that we were only half a mile or so away from it. It occurred to me that it might not have stood up to all that heavy rain we had in the summer, so I left the others and went off to have a look. As a matter of fact it *had* been washed away a bit; so the day after I got back I scraped a few hundred cash together, went back first thing next morning, hired a couple of labourers, and got it patched up again.'

'That explains it,' said Bao-yu. 'Last month, when the pods were beginning to form on the lotuses in Prospect Garden, I picked ten of them and sent Tealeaf to offer them at his grave. When he got back, I asked him if the rains had damaged it at all, and he told me that not only had it not been damaged, but that it was in even better condition than it had been the time before. I knew from that that some friend must have been there recently and restored it. I wish I weren't so cooped up all the time at home. I can *never* do anything I want to by myself. The slightest move I make is sure to be seen and reported, and either I'm physically prevented from going where I want to or else lectured at until I promise not to go. It's useless for me ever to say that I'm going to do anything, because I know that I shan't be allowed to. I can't even spend my own money in the way I want.'

‘This thing at least is something you don’t need to worry about,’ said Xiang-lian, ‘with me outside to look after it for you. Anyway, it’s the thought that counts. It’s enough to know that you would do it yourself if you could. I’ve already put aside the money for his anniversary on the first of next month. You know how broke I always -am. I never have any savings because as soon as I’ve got any money I spend it all. Well, this time I thought I’d better not take any chances, so I put some by well in advance, so-as not to have to stretch my hands out helplessly when the time conies.’

‘I was going to send Tealeaf round to see you about that,’ said Bao-yu, ‘but you never seem to be at home; and you’re such a rolling stone that no one ever knows where to look for you.’

‘Don’t bother to try,’ said Xiang-lian. ‘This is a matter in which each of us does what he can. Anyway, I shall be going away quite soon. It will probably be three or four years before I come back again.’

‘Why?’ said Bao-yu in some agitation.

‘That’s something you’ll know -soon enough when the time comes. I must be going now.’ ‘*Must* you?’ said *Bao-yu.* ‘I so seldom get a chance of seeing you. Can’t we leave together in the evening?’

‘I’m afraid it’s that cousin of yours,’ said Xiang-lian. ‘The usual problem. If I stay any longer, there’s sure to be some kind of trouble. I’d much better go now and avoid *it.’*

Bao-yu reflected for some moments.

‘Yes, I suppose in that case you’d better. Only, if you really and truly *are* going away for a long time, do please let me know before you start. *Please* don’t just slip away without telling me.’

His eyes brimmed over with tears.

‘Of course I’ll come and say good-bye to you,’ said *Xiang-lian.* ‘As long as you promise not to tell anyone.’ He stood up to go. ‘You go in again now. Don’t try to see me out.’

He left the study and made his way to the main gate: but there, unfortunately, was the very person he was trying to avoid.

‘Who’s let my little Liu get away?’ Xue Pan bawled.

Xiang-lian’s eyes flashed angrily. In other circumstances he would have laid him out there and then with a single blow of his fist; but reflecting that to do so now would be interpreted by the others as drunken brawling and would moreover be embarrassing to his host, he restrained himself with some effort

Xue Pan, in whose besotted eyes he appeared as a coveted treasure that was moving at last within his grasp, lurched towards him, smiling happily, and gripped him firmly by the arm.

‘Where are you off to little pal?’

‘Just-going out for a stroll,’ said Xiang-lian. ‘I’ll be back again directly.’

‘It won’t be any more fun here without you,’ said Xue Pan. ‘Do stay a bit longer—just to show me that you care for me, eh? If it’s business that’s taking you away, don’t worry, leave it to me! I don’t care how important it is whether it’s a career you’re after or making a pile—with me for a pal you’ll have no more to worry about!’

Angered and revolted by his odious intimacy, Xiang-lian quickly thought of a plan for disposing of him. Drawing him aside to a spot where they could not be overheard, he pretended to question his sincerity.

‘Are you really so fond of me, or are you just pretending?’ Xue Pan was almost beside himself. His eyes became tiny slits of pleasure:

‘How can you ask such a question, my dear? Pretending? May I die this instant if I am!’

‘Good. This place here is not convenient. We’d better go in again now and sit with the others for a bit. Then I’ll leave, and you can leave a bit after me and follow me back to my place. We’ll make a night of it. I’ve got a couple of very nice little boys there who’ve never been “out” before; so you needn’t bring anyone with you: all

the service we'll need is there already.'

Xue Pan was by now so delighted that his drunkenness had already half left him.

'Do you mean this?'

'What a person!' said Xiang-lian. 'One opens one's heart to you and you don't trust them.'

'No, no, no,' said Xue Pan hurriedly. 'I trust you. I'm no fool. There's only one thing, though: I don't know where you live. If you leave before I do, where am I to look for you?'

'My place is outside the North Gate,' said Xiang-lian. 'Do you think you can tear yourself from home and spend a whole night outside the city?'

'What do I need a home for if I've got you?' said Xue Pan. 'All right,' said Xiang-lian. 'I'll wait for you on the bridge then, outside the North Gate. We'd better get back to the party now. Don't forget: wait a bit after I've gone before going yourself; then -no one should suspect anything.'

'Yes,' said Xue Pan, 'yes.'

The two of them then went in again and resumed their places. Xue Pan found waiting difficult and kept his eyes constantly on Xiang-lian, watching for him to go. At the same time he began, in joyous anticipation of the pleasures in store, to drink with greater and greater abandon, not waiting for the wine to be offered, but stretching out rudely to left and right of him and plying himself from the wine-kettles of his neighbours. Soon he was very drunk indeed.

Xiang-lian now rose to go and succeeded in slipping out of the main gate unobserved. First he gave an order to his page Almond, who was waiting there:

'You go home now. I have some business outside the city to attend to. I'll be back later.'

Then he vaulted into the saddle and rode off until he came to the North Gate of the city. Passing through, he rode on till he came to the bridge, where he halted and took up his-station-to wait for Xue Pan's arrival.

After the time it would take to eat a meal, he caught sight of Xue Pan hurrying along in the distance. His mouth was open, his eyes were staring, and his head turned from side to side as he looked anxiously about him, for all the world like one of those little clapper drums that children twirl upon a stick. So intent was he on scanning the remoter parts of the landscape that he failed to take note of what was nearer at hand and rode right past Xiang-lian without seeing him. Xiang-lian, who for all his loathing could not but laugh at this, gave his horse rein and followed after. Presently Xue Pan began to notice that he was getting into the open country and brought his horse round about. As he did so, he found himself almost face to face with Xiang-lian.

'I *knew* you wouldn't fall me,' he cried delightedly.

Xiang-lian smiled back.

'Let's go on a bit further—just in case anyone is tracking us.'

He trotted on ahead and Xue Pan followed, keeping as close to him as he could. Presently, having satisfied himself that the country ahead was quite deserted, Xiang-lian dismounted near the edge of a reed-filled dyke and tied his horse up to a tree.

'You get down too,' he called pleasantly to Xue Pan. 'Let's first swear an oath that if either of us is unfaithful to the other or betrays our secret to anyone, it shall happen to him as the oath shall say.'

'Yes,' said Xue Pan. 'Good ideal' He dismounted eagerly tied his horse to another tree, and straightway knelt down and began his oath:

'If ever, in the days to come, I prove unfaithful or betray this secret to another, may Heaven and Earth destroy'

He got no further. At that point there was a great thump and the sensation of being hit on the back of the neck by an object like a large iron hammer. Everything became suddenly black, except that the darkness was filled with a

confusion of flying stars, and he collapsed forwards helplessly upon the ground.

Xiang-lian stepped up and surveyed him from above. Someone not used to taking punishment, he concluded. It would be unwise to use too much force on him. Turning him over, he performed, with a few deft flicks over Xue Pan's face, the operation which is described in the profession as 'opening up the fruits hop'.

At first Xue Pan struggled to get up, but Xiang-lian lashed out with his foot and sent him sprawling once more upon his back.

'You were willing, just as much as I was,' Xue Pan muttered plaintively. 'You had only to say so if you weren't. Why fool me into coming out here with you and then beat me up?'

He began cursing him obscenely.

'You blind iniquity!' said Liu Xiang-lian. 'You don't know who you're dealing with. You should be begging for mercy right now, not swearing at me. You're not worth killing, though. I'll just give you a little lesson.'

He picked up his horsewhip and turning Xue Pan on his face once more, proceeded to deal him thirty or forty cuts along the length of-his body, from his shoulders down to his calves. Xue Pan was by now half sober, and finding the pain unbearable, began to roar.

'Look at you!' said Xiang-lian contemptuously. 'I should have thought you could take your medicine a bit better than that.'

He took him by the left leg and dragged him a few steps to where the reeds began, in the stagnant ooze of the dyke, so that he was coated from head to foot with the liquid mud.

'Now,' he said, 'do you know who I am?'

As Xue Pan merely lay in the mud whimpering and made no reply, he threw away his whip and gave him a few thumps with his *fist.* Xue Pan rolled about and bellowed:

'You've broken my ribs. I know you're straight. It was the others who told me you weren't. I shouldn't have listened to them.'

'Leave the others out of this,' said Xiang-lian. 'I'm talking about now.'

'Now?' said Xue Pan. 'Now I know you're straight. I kn6w I was wrong. What more can I say?'

'You'll have to talk a bit prettier than that before I've finished with you,' said Xiang~lian.

'Old pal—' Xue Pan began, whimpering.

Xiang-lian dealt him another thump with his fist.

'Ow! Ow! Chap—'

Two thumps this time.

'Ow! Ow! Sir, then. Please sir, forgive me for being so blind. From now on I shall honour you and fear you.'

Now drink some of this water,' said Xiang-lian. Xue Pan knitted his brows with disgust:

'But this water is really filthy. I couldn't get it down.'

Xiang-lian raised his list threateningly. 'I'll drink,' said Xue Pan hurriedly. 'I'll drink.'

He bent down and drank a mouthful of the water at the base of the reeds; but before he could swallow it, there was a great retching noise and he vomited up all that he had recently eaten and drunk.

'Filthy pig!' said Xiang-lian. 'Now eat *that* up and I let you off'

Xue Pan began kotowing to him.

'Please, for your soul's sake, earn a bit of merit: don't try to make me do that! I couldn't do that if you -killed me.'

'This stench is poisoning me;' said Xiang-lian; and leaving Xue Pan, he unfastened his horse, led it off a few paces, vaulted into the saddle, and galloped away.

Observing with relief that Xiang-lian had really gone, Xue Pan, cursing his folly for having been so egregiously mistaken in his man, attempted to struggle to his feet; but every part of him was hurting so much that *it* was impossible for him to rise.

*

Meanwhile, back at the party, Cousin Zhen and the others, suddenly noticing that the two of them were missing, sought them for a while without success. Someone did say *that* they thought they might have gone out of the North Gate; but Xue Pan had told his pages not to follow him, and they were all in such dread of their master that none of them dared go out there to look. In the end Cousin Zhen became so uneasy that he sent Jia Rong with some of the boys to track them down.

Their trail led them through the North Gate and about two thirds of a mile along the road which crosses the bridge outside it. There, suddenly, they caught sight of Xue Pan's horse, tied up to one of the trees at the side of a reed-filled dyke.

'Good!' they said. 'Where the horse is, the rider must be.' And all of them went over to where the horse was standing.

As they did so, they heard someone groaning among the rushes; and there, when they went to look, was Xue Pan, his clothes torn, his face cut and swollen almost beyond recognition, and so besmirched with mud from head to foot that he had more the appearance of an old wallowing sow than of a human being.

Jia Rong had little difficulty in guessing what had happened. Slipping from his horse, he ordered the servants to help Xue Pan to his feet.

'Tireless in the pursuit of love, Uncle I' he said cheerfully, while they struggled to do his bidding. 'This time it's led you into the reeds of the marshes. I suppose the Dragon King must have taken a fancy to you and carried you off to be his son-in-law. To judge from appearances, I should say that you -must have got caught up on his horn!'

Xue Pan wished that the earth would open and swallow up his shame.

As there was clearly no question of getting him onto his horse, Jia Rong told one of the boys to hurry back to the street outside the North Gate and hire a carrying chair. When Xue Pan had been helped into this, they had him carried into the city, themselves accompanying him on horseback. Jia Rong mischievously proposed that they should take him back to the Lais' house to rejoin the party: but Xue Pan entreated so piteously and begged him so earnestly not to tell anyone of his plight, that Jia Rong relented and allowed him to go back home alone.

Jia Rong himself returned to the party to report back to his father. From his account of the state Xue Pan had been in when they found him Cousin Zhen deduced that he must have been beaten up by Liu Xiang-lian but appeared remarkably unconcerned, for he merely laughed and observed that 'he could do with the lesson'. It is true that he went to inquire after him in the evening, when he got back home from the party; but Xue Pan was by that time nursing his injuries in bed and declined to see him on the grounds that he was feeling too ill.

When Grandmother Jia and her party had got back to their several apartments, Aunt Xue and Bao-chai found Caltrop with her eyes all swollen from weeping. On discovering the cause, they rushed in to look at Xue Pan. Fortunately he appeared to have no bones broken, but his face and body had taken a terrible battering. Torn between maternal anguish at his plight and anger at the folly which had occasioned it, Aunt Xue inveighed against Xue Pan and Xiang-lian by turns. She wanted to tell Lady Wang and get her to have Xiang-lian arrested, but was dissuaded from doing so by Bao-chai.

'It's not important enough for that, Mamma. The two of them had been drinking and fell out over their cups,

that's all there was to it. Whenever that happens, it's always the drunker of the two who gets the worst of it. Besides, everyone knows what a lawless, ungovernable creature Pan is. It's only because you're his mother that you feel differently. If it's satisfaction you want, that can easily be arranged. Just wait a few days until Pan is better and can get about again. I'm sure Mr Zhen and Mr Lian and the other menfolk will be unwilling to pass over this in silence. Probably they will get up a little party and ask this person to it and make him apologize to Pan in front of everyone and admit that he was to blame. But if you insist on making an issue of it *now* and telling Aunt about it, you will make it appear that you are so blind to Pan's faults that you allow him to go around provoking other people, but that as soon as someone stands up to him, you fly up in arms and use our relations' influence to oppress them.'

Aunt Xue at once saw the force of this.

'You are quite right, my child. I was being silly.'

'Dear Mamma! But now you are being sensible. He doesn't fear you, and he won't listen to anyone else. He just goes on getting worse and worse. One or two good, sharp shocks like this might bring him to his senses.'

Meanwhile Xue Pan lay on the kang in his bedroom, cursing Xiang-lian by every name he could think of and calling on his boys to smash up his house, to beat him to death, to have the law on him. Aunt Xue shouted to them that they were to do no such thing. To Xue Pan she explained that Xiang-lian was in any case beyond the reach of his vengeance.

'Xiang-lian behaved very bad because he was drunk. When he came to himself afterwards he was very sorry; and now, because he is afraid of the consequences, he has fled the country.'

When Xue Pan heard that, he—

But you shall learn *that* (if you wish) in the following chapter.

CHAPTER 48

The Love Deluded One turns his thoughts to trade and travel
And the Poetry Enthusiast applies herself to making verses

XUE PAN gradually calmed down when his mother told him that Xiang-lian had fled.

After four or five days the pain of his injuries had subsided, but not the bumps and bruises; and as, while these still disfigured him, he was unwilling to meet any of his acquaintance, he kept to his room on the pretext that he was still too ill to go out.

The tenth month soon came. Several of the employees working in Xue Pan's shops in the capital wanted to go back home for the annual settling of accounts and Xue Pan found himself giving a farewell party for them in his room. Among those present was one Zhang De-hui, the sixty-year-old manager of his largest pawnshop. He had worked with the family since he was a lad and now had a household of his own and an income of two or three thousand taels. He was planning to leave with the others but not return until half way through the following year, as he explained to Xue Pan on this occasion.

'There's a great shortage of stationery and perfumed goods just now,' he said. 'These things are sure to fetch high prices next year. I'm proposing to send my eldest boy here after New Year to look after the shop, so that I can travel back later. I shall buy up supplies of stationery and sandalwood fans on my way, aiming to get back here in time for the Double Fifth. I reckon it should be possible to make several hundred percent profit, even after the

excise and all the other expenses have been deducted.'

This gave Xue Pan an idea.

'I haven't felt like seeing anyone since that beating,' he thought, 'and some excuse for getting away from everybody for a year or so is just what I've been looking for. Obviously I can't go on staying indoors and pretending I'm ill indefinitely. And for another thing, I haven't *done* very much with my life to date: I'm neither a scholar nor a soldier, and though I call myself a merchant, I've never handled a pair of scales or an abacus in my life, not to mention the fact that I know nothing about the places and peoples of the Empire or its roads and waterways. Why don't I get a bit of capital together and spend a year or so travelling around with Zhang De-hui? It won't matter much whether I make any money or not; the main thing is that it will get me away from my disgrace; and there is the added advantage that I shall be able to put in a bit of sight-seeing as well.'

Having so decided, he waited until the other guests had gone and then, making himself as agreeable as he knew how, informed Zhang De-hui of his decision and asked him to delay his departure by a few days so that he would have time to prepare.

That evening he told his mother.

Aunt Xue's initial reaction was one of pleasure, but this quickly gave way to misgivings. It was not that she attached much importance to the loss of a little capital; she was concerned about the scrapes he might get into away from home. And so she ended up by refusing.

'I think you'd better stay here with me. I should worry less. After all, you don't *need* to make this money. It isn't as if you haven't got enough to spend.'

But Xue Pan had made his mind up and was not to be put off.

'You're always telling me how inexperienced I am and how ignorant and how unwilling to learn; yet now that I'm making a real effort to turn over a new leaf by standing on my own feet at last and learning a bit about the business, you won't let me. What do you *want* me to do? I'm not a girl, to be shut up at home all the time: you'll have to let me out *some* time or other. Besides, Zhang De-hui is an old, experienced person and he's worked for our family all his life. If I'm with him, I don't see how anything *can* go wrong. Even if I did ever slip up, I'm sure he'd soon tell me off about it and put me right. And as he knows all there is to know about prices and so forth, I should naturally always consult him on business matters. You couldn't ask for better conditions; yet you won't let me go. Very well, I'll get ready in secret and leave without telling you. You'll see me when I come back next year, after making a fortune! I'll show you!'

With that he went off to bed in a huff.

Aunt Xue discussed the matter with Bao-chai after he had gone.

'It's good that he should want to occupy himself with something serious at last,' said Bao-chai. 'The trouble is, of course, that however fair-sounding his intentions may be *now*, once he's outside he may succumb to his old weaknesses again, and then it will be that much more difficult to control him. However, I suppose that is a risk one has to take. If he is really going to reform, then this experience may prove a life-long blessing. If he is *not*, I don't see that there is very much left that you can do. After all, there is only so much one *can* do for another person: the rest must be left to Heaven. Pan is a grown man now, Mamma. If you maintain that he is too ignorant of the world to be allowed out into it, you are not going to make him any less ignorant by keeping him shut up indoors. And since he is being so reasonable for once, I should make up your mind that you are going to lose eight or nine hundred taels and hand it over to him to see how he manages. After all, he will have someone from our own business helping him and they may well feel some compunction about cheating him; so it' s by no means a foregone conclusion that he *will lose* it all. And for another thing, away from home there won't be those

worthless companions of his to egg him on; nor, on the other hand, will he have anyone to fall back on if he gets into trouble. He will have to fend for himself: eat when he can and go hungry when he can't. And when it dawns on him that he is on his own and has no one he can lean on, he *may* begin to behave a bit better. Surely it's worth trying?'

Aunt Xue pondered her daughter's words for some minutes.

'I think you are probably right,' she said eventually. 'I certainly don't mind using up some of our money on the experiment. If he can learn a bit of sense from it, it will have been money well-spent.'

Having thus concluded their discussion, the two of them went to bed.

Next day Aunt Xue had Zhang De-hui invited round once more, and while he was being entertained by Xue Pan in the study, stationed herself in the loggia at the back and, addressing him through the window from this hidden vantage point, entrusted her boy, with many a fond and careful instruction, to his care. Zhang De-hui gave vigorous assurances of good intent, and having finished his meal, stood up and took his leave, stopping on his way out to add a few words to Xue Pan about arrangements for their departure:

'The almanac says the fourteenth is the best day for travelling. I should start packing and hiring mules straight away if I were you, Mr Xue, so that we can make a start first thing on the fourteenth.'

Xue Pan, delighted at the prospect of getting away so soon, hastened to relay this to his mother.

Assisted by Bao-chai, Caltrop and a couple of old nannies, Aunt Xue devoted the whole of the next few days to packing. She selected five male members of the domestic staff to accompany Xue Pan on his travels: the husband of his o1d wet nurse, two experienced older servants who had been in service with his father, and two of the pages who normally waited on him. Three heavy carts were hired for the luggage and four travelling mules. Xue Pan himself planned to ride on a mule from his own stables—a large, sturdy animal with an iron-grey coat. He also planned to take a saddle-horse of his own as an alternative mount. When all other preparations had been completed, Aunt Xue and Bao-chai devoted the remaining evenings to exhortation and admonishment of the prospective traveller.

On the thirteenth Xue Pan went to take leave of his Uncle Wang's family in the city, after which he went round the two mansions saying his good-byes to the Jias. There was some talk of Cousin Zhen and one or two of the others seeing him off next day for a parting cup on the road; but whether or not anything came of it our narrative does not disclose.

Early on the morning of the fourteenth Aunt Xue and Bao-chai accompanied him to the outer threshold of the inner gate and watched him with tearful eyes until they could see him no more.

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When Aunt Xue moved from Nanking to the capital, she had brought only four or five couples with her in addition to the handful of old nannies and young unmarried maids of her immediate household. Now that five of the menfolk had gone off to accompany Xue Pan on his travels, only one or two male servants were left. The very day that Xue Pan started on his journey, Aunt Xue went into his study, had all the small furniture, blinds, curtains and other movables carried out and stored in her own apartment, and ordered the wives of the absent menservants to move in with her to sleep. She also ordered Caltrop to tidy up Xue Pan's sleeping quarters, lock the door, and move - into her apartment with the rest.

'But Mamma,' Bao-chai protested, 'you've already got all those others to keep you company. Why not let Caltrop move in with me? It gets lonely in the Garden now that the nights are longer: another companion to sit

with me in the evenings when I am sewing would be very welcome.'

'Of course,' said Aunt Xue. 'I was forgetting. I should have thought of it myself. I was telling Pan only the other day: Apricot is so young and scatter-brained and Oriole on her own really isn't enough for you. We really ought to buy you another girl.'

'Buying is all very well if you know what the girl is going to be like,' said Bao-chai; 'but if you make a bad choice, then not only have you wasted your money—that's a small consideration—but you have a very great deal of trouble on your hands. If we are going to buy a girl, it would be much better to take our time over the inquiries and not get one until we are quite sure about her background.

She told Caltrop to get her bedding and toilet things together and ordered Advent and one of the old nannies to carry them for her to Allspice Court. Then she and Caltrop went into the Garden together.

'I was dying to ask the Mistress if she would let me move in with you after Mr Xue had gone,' said Caltrop, 'but I was afraid she might think I only wanted to get into the Garden to play. How wonderful that you should have asked her for me!'

'I knew you'd had your heart set on this Garden for some time past,' said Bao-chai with a smile, 'but you haven't really been free till now. Dashing in and out for a few minutes each day wouldn't have given you time to enjoy it properly. That's why I have waited for this opportunity before asking. Now you will be able to settle in and spend a whole year here. *You* get your wish, you see, and *I* gain a companion!'

'Dear Miss!' said Caltrop 'Now that there is the time and the opportunity, will you teach me how to write poetry, please?'

Bao-chai laughed.

'You're like the -famous general: "one conquest breeds appetite for another". I advise you to take things more gently. Today is your first day in the Garden. If I were you, I should go out of that corner gate and, beginning with Lady Jia's, call in at all the different apartments and pay your respects to everybody. You needn't go Out of your way to tell them that you have moved into the Garden; but if the subject should happen to arise, tell them that I have brought you in as my companion. After that, when you get back into the Garden, you ought to go round and call on all the young ladies.'

Caltrop was just going oft to do as Bao-chai advised, when Patience came hurrying in. She was in a state of some agitation, which she smilingly masked, however, in response to Caltrop's eager greetings.

'I'm bringing her in here to live with me as my companion,' Bao-chai explained. 'I was just about to report the matter to your mistress.'

'You don't need to do *that,* Miss!' said Patience. 'Whatever next?'

'On the contrary,' said Bao-chai. 'It's the correct thing to do. "Every inn has its landlord and every temple its priest," as they say. Even though it is not a very important matter, I think I should report it, if only so that the women on night watch may know that there are two more girls—her and Advent—living in the Garden now, and make no difficulties about letting them in and out. Anyway, if you will tell your mistress when you get back, I won't bother to send anyone about it myself.'

Patience promised that she would.

'Now you're here,' she said to Caltrop, 'you ought -to go and introduce yourself to your new neighbours.'

'I was just sending her off to do that when you came,' said Bao-chai.

'Well, you can leave nr out,' Patience told Caltrop. 'Mr Lian is ill at home in bed.'

Caltrop murmured a reply and went off to make her calls, beginning with Grandmother Jia.

As soon as she had gone, Patience -seized Bao-chai's hand and asked her, in a low and urgent voice, whether she

had heard 'their' news.

'No,' said Bao-chai. 'I've been so busy these last few days helping to get Pan off that I haven't heard *anyone's* news. I haven't even seen any of the girls during the past day or two.'

'Sir She has beaten Mr Lian so badly that he can hardly move. Do you mean to say you haven't even heard *that?'*

'I heard something to that effect,' said Bao-chai, 'but I didn't know whether to believe it or not. I'd been thinking of going to ask your mistress about it when you came in just now. What did he beat him for?'

'It was that toad Jia Yu-cun's doing,' said Patience bitterly. 'Horrible man! It was a bad day for this family when they got to know him. I don' t know *how* much trouble he hasn't stirred up in the few years since first he came here. Last spring Sir She saw some antique fans somewhere which so impressed him that when he got home and looked at his own collection he decided that they were all no good and at once sent everyone scouring around for some mote. Now there was a certain poor, unlucky devil they call "Stony"—that's a nickname, of course: I don't know what his real name is—so hard up that he never had enough to eat but who, it go happened, was the owner of a collection of twenty antique fans that he guarded very closely, not even allowing them to be taken out of his door. Mr Lian had a terrible job even getting to see this man. In the end he did though, and eventually, after a great deal of persuasion, managed to get himself invited into the house to have a look at the fans. Mr Lian said he was only allowed a glimpse of them even then, but he said you could see at once that they were the kind of fans that simply can't be had anywhere today. The fansticks were made of very special kinds of bamboo—naiad's tears, black bamboo, fawnskin and jadewood—and the paintings on them were all by old masters. When he told Sir She about them, Sir She said at once that come what may he must have them and that Stony could name his price. But Stony didn't want a price not if they offered him a thousand taels a fan, he said. He said he would rather die of hunger and cold than sell them. There was nothing Sir She could do about that, of course, except swear all the -time at Mr Lian for being "incompetent". But I ask you, Miss: Mr Lian had already promised five hundred taels cash down and still old Stony had refused, so what more was there he could do? The matter might have rested there if that black-hearted villain Jia Yu-cun hadn't got to hear about it. *He* soon thought of a way. He made out that Stony owed the government some money, had him hauled off to the yamen, and when he got there, told him they would have to detrain on his property to pay off the debt. Then he sent his officers round to Stony's house, seized the fans, valued them at a government price, and sent them to Sir She as a present. Poor old Stony! I don't know whether he's alive now or dead. What I *do* know is that when Sir She was telling Mr Lian how he had come by the fans at last, Mr Lian couldn't help remarking that he didn't see anything very "competent" about ruining a man and stripping him of all he possessed for so trifling a reason. That made Sir She very angry, because of course he assumed that Mr Lian was really getting at him. That was the main reason for the beating; but then there were a number of smaller things a few days later—I don't even remember now what they were. *They* seem to have brought things to a head, because he suddenly went for him. He didn't pull him down and beat him with a flat-stick or a cudgel in the normal way either: he just picked up the first thing that came to hand—I don't know what it was—and started hitting him with it where he stood. He cut his face open in two places. We heard that Mrs Xue has got some kind of lotion for injuries of this sort and I wondered if you'd mind letting me have a tablet.'

Bao-chai at once sent Oriole for the tablets and told her to bring two of them.

'I won't go and see your mistress now, under the circumstances,' she said, when she handed them to Patience. 'Give her my regards, though, won't you?'

Patience thanked her and left.

*

Our story returns now to Caltrop. After dinner, by which time she had finished making her calls, while Bao-chai went to join Bao-yu and the others in Grandmother Jia's apartment, Caltrop went off on her own to visit the Naiad's House.

Dai-yu was by this time well on the way to recovery. She seemed so delighted to hear that Caltrop had moved into the Garden, that Caltrop felt emboldened to make her a request:

'Now that I'm here and have got more time to spare, do you think you could teach me .to write poetry? It would be such a piece of luck for me if you would.'

'You can make your kotow and become my pupil if you like;' said Dai-yu goodnaturedly. 'I'm no expert myself, but I dare say I could teach you the rudiments.'

Would you really?' said Caltrop. 'Then I'll be your disciple. But you must promise not to get impatient with me.'

'There's nothing in it really,' said Dai-yu 'There's really hardly anything to learn. In Regulated Verse there are always four couplets: the "opening couplet", the "developing couplet", the "turning couplet" and the "concluding couplet". In the two middle couplets, the "developing" and "turning" ones, you have to have tone-contrast and parallelism. That's to say, in each of those couplets the even tones of one line have to contrast with oblique tones in the other, and *vice versa*, and the substantives and non-substantives have to balance each other though if you've got a really good, original line, it doesn't matter all that much even if the tone-contrast and parallelism are wrong.'

'Ah, that explains it I' said Caltrop, pleased. 'I've got an old poetry-book that I look at once in a while when I can find the time, and I long ago noticed that in some of the poems the tone-contrast is very strict, while in others it's not. Someone told me the rhyme:

For one, three and five
You need not strive;
But two, four and six
You must firmly fix.

and at first that seemed to explain the exceptions. But then I found that in *some* old poems even the second, fourth and sixth syllables seemed to have -the wrong tones, and I've been puzzling about it ever since. Now, from what you've just said, it sounds as if these rules really aren't important after all—that the most important thing is that the language should be original.'

'You've hit it exactly 1' said Dai-yu. 'As a matter of fact even the *language* isn't of primary importance. The *really* important things are the ideas that lie behind it. If the ideas behind it are genuine, there's no need to embellish the language for the poem to be a good one. That's what they mean when they talk about "not letting the words harm the meaning

'I love that couplet by Lu You,' said Caltrop:

'Behind snug curtained doors the incense lingers;
The well-worn concave patch the ground ink settles.
That's genuine, isn't it? So vivid.'

'Good gracious! You mustn't go reading *that* sort of stuff!' said Dai-yu. 'It's only because of your lack of experience that you can think shallow -stuff like that any good. Once you get stuck into *that* rut, you'll never get out of it. You do as I tell you. I've got the *Collected Works* of Wang Wei here. You take a hundred of Wang Wei's pentasyllabic poems in Regulated Verse and read and re-read them, carefully pondering what you read,

until you are thoroughly familiar with them all. After that read a hundred or two of Du Fu's Regulated Verse heptasyllabics and a hundred or two of Li Bo's heptasyllabic quatrains; then, with a firm foundation of those three poets inside you, if you go on to look at some of the earlier poets like Tao Yuan-ming, Xie Ling-yun, Ruan ji, Yu Xin and Bao Zhao, with your quickness and intelligence you should have no difficulty in turning yourself into a fully-fledged bard within less than a twelvemonth.'

'In that case,' said Caltrop excitedly, '*dear* Miss Lin, would you please lend me that book you mentioned, so that I can take it back with me and study it before I go to bed?'

Dai-yu told Nightingale to fetch down the volume of Regular Pentasyllabics from the *Collected Works* of Wang Wei.

'Read the ones I've marked with **red** circles,' she said, handing the book to Caltrop. 'They are my own selection. Just work your way through them gradually, taking each one as it comes. If you have any difficulties, you can either ask Miss Bao about them or else get *me* to explain them to you next time you see me.'

Caltrop carried the book back with her to Allspice Court, and sitting down under the lamp, began reading -the poems, oblivious to all around her. Bao-chai made several attempts at making her go to bed, but in the end, impressed by such total absorption, gave up and left her alone.

*

Next morning, just as Dai-yu had completed her toilet, a smiling Caltrop walked in, holding out the volume of Wang Wei and asking to exchange it for a volume of Du Fu's heptasyllabics.

'How many of them do you think you can remember? Dai-yu asked her.

'I've been through all the ones marked with **red** circles,' said Caltrop.

'And do you think you have 'learnt anything from them ?' 'I *think* so,' said Caltrop. 'Though I can-'t be sure. Perhaps you can tell me.'

'Certainly,' said Dai-yu. 'Discussion is what I was hoping for. it is the only way of making progress. Tell me what you think they have taught you.'

'Well,' said Caltrop, 'as I see it, poetry is very good at saying things which you can't exactly explain but which leave a very vivid impression in your mind; also it often says things which at first seem illogical but are quite logical and natural when you stop to think about them.'

'That sounds very perceptive,' said Dai-yu. 'What about giving an example or two of what you mean?'

'Take that third couplet from his poem "On the Frontier",' said Caltrop:

'Over a lone fire the straight smoke hangs;
In the long river the round sun sets.

Now how can smoke really be "straight"? And why "the round sun"? Of *course* the sun is round! Yet when you close the book and start thinking about those lines, the scene they de scribe is so vivid that it's almost as though you had been there. And if you ask yourself what other two words be could have used instead of "straight" and "round", you realize that there aren't any. Then again, in a couplet from another of his poems:

When the sun sets, the water whitens;
When the tide rises, all the world is **green.**

"Whitens" and "**green**" at first seem like nonsense; but when you start thinking about it, you realize that he *had* to use those two words in order to describe the scene exactly as it was. When you read those lines out loud, the flavour of them is so concentrated that it's as though you had an olive weighing several -thousand catties inside your mouth! And there's another couplet of his:

Down by the ford the late sun lingers;
Over the village a smoke-thread climbs.

"Lingers" and "climbs": so simple, but so clever! I remember that year we came up to the capital we moored the boat one evening towards dusk in a very lonely stretch of country with only a few trees on the bank and a few houses far away in the distance from which the **blue** smoke of peasants cooking their evening meal was rising high, high into the clouds. When I read this couplet last night, it suddenly took me back to that very spot.'

Bao-yu and Tan-chun had come in while she was talking and quietly sat down to listen. Bao-yu was impressed.

'To judge by what you've just said, you don't need to read any more poetry. The Emperor Jian-wen once remarked that "appreciation needs not to seek far afield". From your discussion of that last couplet, I should say that you have already reached the *samādhi!*'

'Actually, although you won't know this yet,' said Dai-yu, 'that "smoke-thread climbs" line you admire so much is based on a line written by an earlier poet. If I show it to you, I think you will agree that it is even more austerely effective than Wang Wei's line.'

She took down a copy of Tao Yuan-ming's *Works*, hunted out the couplet she had in mind, and handed it to her to look at:

Half-lost in haze the distant haunts of men,
Whose dawdling smoke the unseen hamlet marks.

Caltrop read it and nodded approvingly:

Yes, I see. He got the idea for "climbs" from the "dawdling" of this earlier line.'

Bao-yu laughed delightedly.

'Perfect! You must end your discussion there. If you go on any longer, you'll begin unlearning what you've already discovered. You can start writing poetry yourself now, straight away. It's sure to be good.'

'I can see I shall soon be writing an invitation asking you to join our poetry club,' said Tan-chun smilingly.

Don't make fun of me, Miss Tan,' said Caltrop. 'Writing poetry is something I've always wanted to do, and now I've got the chance, I'm learning for the fun of it. I don't expect I shall ever be any good.'

'Good heavens! *we* only write for the fun of it ourselves,' said Tan-chun. 'You surely don't imagine that what we write is good poetry? If we set ourselves up to be real poets, people outside this Garden who got to hear of it would laugh so loud that their teeth would drop out!'

'That's what Mencius calls "throwing yourself away",' said Bao-yu. 'You shouldn't do that. The other day, when I was discussing Xi-chun's painting with some of Father's gentlemen, they told me they had heard about our poetry club and asked if they could see some of our poems, so I wrote a few out for them from memory. I assure you, they were genuinely impressed. In fact, they have calligraphed them for blocks to have them printed.'

‘Is this really true?’ Tan-chun and Dai-yu asked incredulously.
‘If anyone’s telling lies, it must be the parrot;’ said Bao-yu.
The two girls were aghast.
‘You really are the limit! Quite apart from the fact that the poems aren’t good enough, you have no business to go showing our stuff to people outside.’
‘What’s the harm?’ said Bao-yu. ‘If those famous poems written by poetesses in days gone by had never been -taken outside -the women’s quarters, we shouldn’t know about them today.’
Just then Xi-chun’s maid Picture arrived and called Bao-yu away to her mistress. Caltrop pressed Dai-yu to lend her the volume of Du Fu; she also begged Dai-yu and Tan-chun to set her a subject for a poem.
‘Let me try my hand at writing one myself,’ she said, ‘-and you can correct it for me.’
‘Last night there was a very fine moon,’ said Dai-yu. ‘I’ve been thinking of writing a poem about it myself, but haven’t yet got round to it. Why don’t you write a poem about the moon? You can use “sky” and “light” as your rhymes; but I won’t set the other rhyme words for you, you can use whichever ones you like.’
Clutching the volume of poems, Caltrop returned in great glee and at once began thinking about her composition. After working out the first line or two, she could not resist peeping at the Du Fu and reading a couple of poems. And in this way she continued, alternately reading and composing by fits and starts, too excited to think about eating or drinking or to sit still in the same place for two or three minutes together.
‘Why give yourself so much trouble when you don’t have to?’ Bao-chai asked her. ‘It’s all that Frowner’s fault. I shall have to go and have it out with her. You are inclined to be a dreamer at the best of times, but now you are becoming a real *case* I’
‘Please, Miss Bao I’ said Caltrop. ‘You are putting me off.’ She was writing while she said this. Soon she had completed the draft of a poem and handed it to Bao-chai to look at. Bao-chai read it and laughed.
‘No, this is no good. This isn’t the way to write poetry. Still, don’t be disheartened. I should take it to her just the same and see what she says.’
Caltrop followed her advice and went off to look for Dai-yu. Dai-yu took the poem and looked at it. This is what Caltrop had written:

A chilly radiance bright, a fair round shape,
The cold white moon hangs in the middle sky.
The poet for inspiration seeks her oft;
The homesick traveller from her turns his eye.
Like a jade mirror hanging on azure wall,
Like disc of jade suspended from on high.
No need for lamps on such a glorious night,
When every beam and post is bathed in light.

Dai-vu smiled.
‘You’ve certainly got some ideas there, but the words you’ve expressed them in some-how don’t hang together properly. It’s because you haven’t read enough poetry yet. It looks to me as if you’ve got rather stuck with this poem. If I were you, I’d abandon it altogether and begin another one. Let yourself go a bit more this time.’
Caltrop returned in silence. This time she did not even go indoors but remained outside among the trees at the water’s edge—to the considerable mystification of those who passed by and saw her—sitting on a rock

meditating, or squatting on her heels in order to scratch characters on the ground.
Li Wan, Bao-chai, Tan-chun and Bao-yu, hearing of this interesting sight, stood on a little hillock some distance away from her and watched with amusement. Bao-chai insisted that Caltrop had gone mad.
'You should have heard her last night. She was muttering away to herself until four or five in the morning. And she can't have slept for more than half an hour, for as soon as it was daylight, I could hear her getting up again. She rushed through her toilet and then rushed off to see Frowner. Presently she came back again, and after mooning around for half the day, she produced a poem; and as *that* was no good, I assume she is now trying to write another one.'
'"The genius of the place brings out the excellence of the person",' said Bao-yu, misquoting slightly. 'The -lord above doesn't give us our talents for nothing. We always used to say what a pity it was that a person of her qualities should lack refinement—but look at her now! It proves there is some justice in the world.'
'If only *you* had her powers of concentration,' said Bao-chai, 'you might study to some purpose.'
Bao-yu did not reply.
Just then a very pleased-looking Caltrop was to be seen hurrying off in the direction of the Naiad's House.
'Let's go after her and see if it's any better this time,' said Tan-chun.
When the three of them arrived, Dai-yu had the poem in her hand and was already discussing it.
'What's it like?' they asked her.
'Well, for a beginner, of course, it's very good,' said Dai-yu; 'but it isn't really right yet. It's too laboured. She'll have to try again.'

The others asked if they might have a look. This is what they read:

Silver or water on the casement cold?
See its round source in yon clear midnight sky.
Blanched ghostly white, plum-blossoms spread their scent,
And dew on willow-slips begins to dry.
Is it white powder on the paving spilled?
    Or grains of frost that on the railings lie?
I wake to find no other soul in sight
But that still face which through the blind sheds light.

'It's not much like a poem about the moon,' said Bao-chai, 'but if you altered the title to "Moonlight", it would fit rather well. Look at these lines: each of them is not about the moon, it's about moonlight. Well, *all* poetry is only a lot of nonsense! I should leave it for a few days, Caltrop, if I were you. There's no hurry.'
But Caltrop, though she had truly believed that this second poem was a minor masterpiece and was extremely dashed by its rejection, was most unwilling to give up. She wanted to begin thinking about her next poem straight away; and as she found the talk and laughter of the cousins distracting, she went out to where the bamboos began, at the foot of the terrace. There she gave herself up to cogitation of such fierce intensity that she became totally obvious to all sights and sounds around her, and when Tan-chun jokingly called to her through the window to 'call it a day', she merely looked up with a somewhat dazed expression and replied that '"day" didn't rhyme: the rhyme word she was using was "sky"'. The others, hearing this, all burst out laughing.

'The girl's got poetry mania!' said Bao-chai. 'This is all Frowner's doing.'
'Nonsense!' said Dai-yu. 'The Sage tells us that we should be "tireless in teaching others", She came and asked

me for help. How could I possibly refuse her?'

'Let's take her to Xi-chun's place and get her to look at the painting,' said Li Wan. 'Perhaps it will take her mind off poetry for a bit.'

She went outside, the others following, and taking Caltrop by the hand, led her to the Spring In Winter room of Lotus Pavilion, where they found Xi-chun, fatigued by hr labours, lying on the couch taking an afternoon nap. The painting was on the wall, masked by a covering of gauze. The cousins woke up Xi-chun and removed the cover from the painting. Barely three-tenths of it had been completed. Several female figures were to be seen scattered about here and there in the landscape.

'Look,' they said, pointing them out to Caltrop, 'anyone who can write poetry gets put into the picture. You must hurry up and learn, so that she can put you in too!'

After chatting and joking for a while, they broke up and went off to their several apartments.

Caltrop could think of nothing else but her poem. in the evening she sat by the lamp thinking about it, and it was after midnight when she went to bed. Even in bed she lay with her eyes wide open, continuing to think about it; and it was not until three or four in the morning that she gradually dropped off to sleep.

At daybreak Bao-chai woke up and listened: Caltrop appeared to be fast asleep.

'She was tossing about all night,' thought Bao-chai. 'I wonder if she managed to finish her poem. I won't call her now; she must be exhausted.'

Just then she heard Caltrop laugh and call out in her sleep:

'Ha! Got it! Let her try saying that *this* one isn't any good!'

Bao-chai was both touched and amused.

'*What* have you got?' she asked, quickly waking her. 'This poetry business is becoming positively unnatural! I don't know about learning how to write poetry: what you'll likelier get, if you go on much longer in this fashion, is a serious illness!'

The intensity of Caltrop's application had, in fact, induced a concentration of the vital fluids which, finding no outlet during the daytime, had resulted in her being able to produce a whole eight4ine poem in her sleep. She wrote it down as soon as she had combed and washed, and then went out to look for the others.

At Drenched Blossoms, in the little pavilion on the bridge, she came upon Li Wan and the cousins on the way back from their morning duty-call on Lady Wang. Bao-chai was just telling them how Caltrop had composed a poem while she was dreaming and how she had cried out in her sleep, and the others were laughing as they listened. When they looked up and saw Caltrop herself approaching them, they eagerly asked her if they might see her poem.

For further details, please see the following chapter.

CHAPTER 49

Red flowers bloom brighter in dazzling snow
And venison reeks strangely on rosebud lips

WHEN Caltrop saw the cousins talking and laughing about her, she came forward, smiling herself, and handed the poem she was carrying to Dai-yu.

‘See what you think of *this* one,’ she said. ‘If this one is all tight, I shall go on learning; if it’s still no good, I shall just have to give up the whole idea.’

The others clustered round Dai-yu to look. This is what they read:

Ethereal splendour no cloud can blot out!
Chaste lovely presence of the cold night sky!
From a white world the washer’s dull thud sounds,
Till in the last watch cocks begin to cry,
While, by a fisherman’s sad flute entranced,
A lady leans out from her casement high;
And you, White Goddess, lulled in sweet delight,
Wish every night could be a fifteenth night.

There were exclamations from all of them when they had finished reading it.

‘But this is not just “all right”,’ they said, ‘this is a good and highly original poem. It shows the truth of the proverb: “Nothing is too difficult for one who has a mind to do it.” We shall definitely be inviting you now to join our poetry club.’

Caltrop, supposing that they were only saying this to humour her, could not quite believe them and continued to press Dai-yu and Bao-chai for the truth.

Just at that moment a number of maids and old serving women came hurrying towards them in a state of great excitement:

‘Mrs Zhu! Young ladies! Come and meet you relations! A whole lot of young ladies and other people we’ve never seen before have just arrived.’

Li Wan laughed.

‘What are you talkin.[8] about? *Whose* relations have just arrived?’

There are two young cousins of yours, Mrs Zhu,’ they said, ‘and there’s a young lady who says she’s Miss Bao’s cousin, and a young gentleman that’s cousin to Mr Xue. *We’re* on our way now to fetch Mrs Xue. Why don’t you and the young ladies go on ahead and meet them?’

They hurried off to complete their mission.

‘It sounds as if my cousin Xue Ke and his sister must have come,’ said Bao-chai. ‘*Can* it be them, though?’

‘And it sounds as if my Aunt Li must have decided to bring her two daughters to the capital,’ said Li Wan. ‘But how strange that they should have arrived together I’

When she and the cousins entered Lady Wang’s main reception room, they found it packed with people. Apart from the ones whom the servants had mentioned, they found Lady Xing’s brother’s wife with her daughter Xing Xiu-yan. The three of them, Lady Xing’s brother and his wife and daughter, had come up to the capital to put themselves under the protection of Lady Xing. By a coincidence Xi-feng’s brother Wang Ren was starting out for the capital just as they were planning to set out themselves, so, on the strength of the marriage connection (Wang Ren being the brother of Lady Xing’s daughter-in-law), they had elected to travel in his company.

While stopping at one of the canal ports half-way along their route, they had made the acquaintance of Li Wan’s widowed aunt and her two daughters, Li Wen and Li Qi, also on their way to the capital, and when it emerged that all of them were marriage-relations of the Jia family, these three, too, had joined the party. A little after this, Xue Pan’s cousin Xue Ke had decided to bring his sister Bao-qin to the capital to attend to the

formalities of her betrothal, Some years previously her father, while temporarily residing in the capital, had promised her to the son of a certain Academician Mei, but had died before the betrothal could be made formal. Hearing that his aunt's kinsman Wang Ren was also on his way to the capital, Xue Ke and his sister had pushed on ahead to -join him. Thus it was that today all these people presented themselves simultaneously at the Rong mansion lo6lting for their various relations.

When at last the introductions and courtesies were over, it became clear that Grandmother Jia and Lady Wang were delighted with the new arrivals.

I *knew* something nice was going to happen from the way the lampwick was behaving last night,' said Grandmother Jia. 'It kept flaring up and then forming into little balls at the top. You see, I was tight!'

A general exchange of family talk ensued, and the handling over by the visitors of the presents they had brought with them. After that Grandmother Jia invited them all to take lunch with her, with wine to celebrate.

Xi-feng, it goes without saying, was now busier than ever. Li Wan and Bao-chai, who had a great deal of catching up on family news to do, were also kept busy exchanging information with their relations about all the things that had happened during the years since they last met. Dai-yu, observing them, at first shared in their happiness, but when she began to reflect on the contrast with her own solitary and orphaned state, she was obliged to go away in order to hide her tears. Bao-yu, well aware of the reason for her sudden disappearance, went after her, and with a good deal of coaxing, succeeded at last in comforting her.

As soon as Dai-yu had dried her tears, Bao-yu hurried back to **Green** Delights to tell Aroma, Musk and Skybright about the visitors.

'You ought to go and have a look,' he told them. 'This nephew of my Aunt Xue's is *completely* different from Cousin Pan. From his looks and behaviour you'd think he was Bao-chai's brother. He's certainly more like her than Pan is. And as for the sister—you're always saying what a beauty Cousin Chai is, but wait till you've seen *her!* And then there are my sister-in-law's two cousins—well, words just fail-me! Heavenly lord, what a store of beauty you must have at your disposal to be able to produce such paragons! I've been like the frog living at the bottom of the well who thought the world was a little round pool of water. Up to now I've always believed that the girls in this household were without equals anywhere; but now, even without my needing to go outside, here they come, each one more beautiful than the last! Today has been an education for me. Don't tell me there are any *more* like this:

the shock would be too great!'

He laughed excitedly. Aroma saw that he was in one of his crazy moods and refused to go and look. But Skybright and the others were more curious and at once hurried over for a peep. They returned soon after, full of smiles, to report on what they had seen.

'Do go and look!' they urged Aroma. 'There's Lady Xing's niece and this cousin of Miss Bao's and Mrs Zhu's two cousins: it's not often you get a chance to see four such beautiful bulrushes together!'

Scarcely had these words been uttered when a smiling Tan-chun came in looking for Bao-yu.

'Our poetry club is in luck,' she said, finding him indoors with the maids. 'Think of all those new members!'

'Yes,' said Bao-yu. 'What a happy inspiration of yours it was to start it! It's almost as though providence had sent these people here to make it prosper. But are you sure they can all write poetry?'

'I've already asked them,' said Tan-chun. 'They are too modest to say outright, of course, but from what I can judge I'm pretty sure that either they all can, or even if they can't, would learn very quickly. Look how quick Caltrop has been.'

'Which of the four do you think is the prettiest, Miss?' said Skybright. *'I* say Miss Bao's cousin.'

‘Yes, I think I agree,’ said Tan-chun. ‘I think even Bao-chai is not quite as beautiful as her.’

Aroma had been listening to all this with growing curiosity. ‘This is certainly news to *me!’* she said. ‘I shouldn’t have thought it possible to find *anyone* more beautiful than Miss Bao. I must go and have a look.’

‘Grandmother was completely captivated as soon as she set eyes on her,’ said Tan-chun. ‘She’s already insisted that Mother should become her godmother, and it’s decided that Grandmother shall bring her up as her own grandchild.’

‘Really?’ Bao-yu seemed delighted.

‘When have I ever told you a lie?’ said Tan-chun. There was a glint of mischief in her eye: ‘Now that she’s got such a beautiful granddaughter, she’ll probably lose interest in her darling grandson.’

‘That doesn’t matter,’ said Bao-yu unconcernedly. ‘She *ought* to give preference to girls. That’s as it should be. By the way, it’s the sixteenth today. It’s the day for our poetry dub meeting.’

‘Cousin Lin has only recently got up, and Ying-chun is ill again,’ said Tan-chun. ‘We’re not really in any shape for a meeting at the moment.’

‘Ying-chun doesn’t care much about writing poetry anyway,’ said Bao-yu. ‘Surely we can manage without *her ?’*

‘Yes, but I think we ought to wait a few days, even so” said Tan-chun. ‘Why don’t we wait until we’ve got to know the newcomers a bit better and then invite them to join us? I shouldn’t think sister-in-law or Cousin Chai can either of them be much in the mood for writing poetry at the moment. And Xiang-yun isn’t here. And Frowner has only just recovered. No one is really up to it yet. We ought to wait until Yun arrives and the new lot have settled in; then, when Frowner is completely better and sister-in-law and Cousin Chai are a bit less preoccupied and Caltrop has made some more progress, we can invite everyone to a plenary session. What you and I ought to do now is go round to Grandma’s and see what arrangements are being made about these people’s accommodation. We know that Chai’s cousin is staying here, because Grandma has adopted her; but we don’t know yet about the others. If there are no plans for them to stay here, we must ask Grandma to invite them. If possible we should get her to let them live in the Garden. It would be fun to have some more neighbours.’

Bao-yu grew quite radiant at the thought.

‘How clever you are, Tan!’ he told his sister admiringly.

‘I’m such a stupid ass. I get so carried away that I don’t think about the important things like you do.’

Brother and sister then went together to Grandmother Jia’s apartment, where they found the old lady in wonderful high spirits following Lady Wang’s recognition of Xue Bao-quin as her god-daughter. She considered that this entitled her to treat the girl as her grandchild, which she had begun doing by insisting that she end the nights with *her* in her apartment and not in the Garden with Bao-chai. Xue Ke would naturally stay with his aunt and occupy the study that Xue Pan had vacated.

‘This niece of yours surely doesn’t need to go back to her parents yet?’ Grandmother Jia said to Lady Xing. ‘Let her stay in the Garden for a few days and enjoy herself.’

Lady Xing’s brother and sister-in-law had been living in extremely straitened circumstances, and now that .they had come up to the capital, were relying on her to provide them with accommodation and financial assistance. She was naturally only too delighted to have one less person to her charge, and promptly handed Xiu-yan over to Xi-feng to dispose of.

Bearing in mind the varied, somewhat peculiar, temperaments of the Garden’s inhabitants, Xi-feng doubted the wisdom of putting Xiu-yan in with one of the others; on the other hand she foresaw disadvantages in opening up a separate establishment for her. In the end she put her in with Ying chun, reflecting that if the girl *did*

experience any difficulties in -living with Ying-chun, then even if Lady Xing got to hear of it, she, Xi-feng, could not be held responsible, since Ying-chun was Lady Xing's own half-daughter.

From this time onwards, not counting the time she spent at home with her parents, Xiu-yan received, for every whole month that she lived with Ying-chun in Prospect Garden, an allowance from Xi-feng of exactly the same amount as -the monthly allowance that was paid to Ying-chun herself.

To Xi-feng's dispassionate eye it soon became apparent that in both temperament and behaviour Xiu-yan was quite unlike Lady Xing and her parents that she was in fact an extremely sweet and lovable person. Sorry that so gentle a soul should be so poor and unfortunate, Xi-feng treated her with a tact and considerateness that she did not always show the others. Lady Xing, on the other hand, seemed -scarcely aware of her niece's existence.

Grandmother Jia and Lady Wang esteemed Li Wan as a good and virtuous young woman who, having lost her husband at an early age, bore widowhood with fortitude and restraint. Now that this widowed aunt had arrived, they refused to bear of her taking lodgings outside, and though the good lady made many polite efforts to decline, insisted that she and her two daughters, Li Wen and Li Qi, should move into Sweet-rice Village and stay there with Li Wan at the family's expense.

No sooner had the new arrivals begun settling in than news came that Grandmother Jia's nephew Shi Ding, the Marquis of Zhong-jing, was being transferred to an important position in one of the outer provinces and would shortly be leaving for his new post, taking his family with him. Grandmother Jia could not bear the idea of a permanent separation from her great-niece, and so it was agreed that Xiang-yun, too, should move into residence with the Jias. It was Grandmother Jia's original intention that Xi-feng should set up a separate establishment for her in the Garden; but as Xiang-yun herself rigorously opposed this idea and insisted on living with her beloved Bao-chai, she was allowed to have her way.

The Garden's society was now larger and livelier than it bad ever been before. With Li Wan as its doyenne it numbered if you counted Xi-feng as an honorary member thirteen people: Li Wan, Ying-chun, Tan-chun, Xi-chun, Bao-chai, Dai-yu, Xiang-yun, Li Wen, Li Qi, Bao-qin, Xing Xiu-yan, Bao-yu and Xi-feng. Apart from the two young married women, the rest were all fifteen, sixteen or seventeen years old. Most of them were in fact born in the same year, several of them in the same month or even on the same day. Not only Grandmother Jia and Lady Wang and the servants, even the young people themselves had difficulty in remembering who was senior to whom, and soon gave up trying, and abandoned any attempt at observing the usual formalities of address.

Caltrop could now think of nothing else all day long but writing poetry. Up to now she had refrained from importuning Bao-chai too persistently for advice, but with the arrival of an unwearying talker like Shi Xiang-yun upon the scene she was in her element. Xiang-yun was only too willing to accede to her requests for instruction, and morning, noon and night the two of them were to be found together, always in animated discussion.

'You two are deafening me with your perpetual chatter,' Bao-chai complained. 'Imagine how ridiculous and unmaidenly it would seem to a man of letters if he heard that *girls* were treating poetry as a serious occupation! Caltrop on her own was bad enough, but with a chatterbox like you on top of it, Yun, I'm finding it a bit too much. Everywhere I go it's "the profundity of Du Fu", or "Wei Ying-wu of Soochow's limpidity", or "the somewhat meretricious charm of Wen Ting-yun", or "Li Shang-yin's obscurity". Still, there are two important *living* poets I've so far heard no mention of.'

'Oh?' said Xiang-yun, all agog. 'Which two?'

'I've heard no mention of Crazy Caltrop's prodigious pertinacity or the linguipotent loquacity of Shi Xiang-yun,' said Bao-chai.

The other two burst out laughing..

At that moment Bao-qin arrived. She was wearing a magnificent rain-cape that glittered as she moved with gold and **green**ish lights. Bao-chai asked her where she had got it from.

'Lady Jia gave me it,' said Bao-qin. 'She looked it out for me because it was beginning to sleet.'

Caltrop examined it curiously.

'No wonder it looks so beautiful: this is woven out of peacock's down.'

'That's not peacock's down,' said Xiang-yun. 'It's made from mallard's head-feathers.' She smiled at Bao-qin teasingly:

'One can see how fond of you she must be. She's fond of Bao-yu, but she's never let him wear *this.'*

Bao-chai laughed:

'To each a different fortune meted—

that's certainly a true saying. I never dreamt that she would be coming here—much less that when she did, Lady Jia would immediately fail for her like this!'

'Apart from the time you spend with Her Old Ladyship,' Xiang-yun advised Bao-qin, 'I should stick to the Garden as much as possible if I were you. In these two places you can eat and drink and play anywhere you please. But be careful of Lady Wang's place. If *she's* in when you go there, then you can sit and talk with her as long as you like; but if she's not, it's best not to go inside. There are a lot of nasty people in there who like to do us harm.'

This highly indiscreet warning was uttered so matter-of-factly that Bao-chai, Bao-qin, Caltrop and Oriole were compelled to laugh.

'I won't say you are thoughtless,' said Bao-chai, because you obviously mean well; but you really are a bit too outspoken. You and Qin ought to be -sisters, since you are so concerned about her.'

Xiang-yun looked at Bao-qin appraisingly.

'She is the only one of us who *could* wear this cape,' she said. 'Anyone else would look wrong in it.'

Just then Amber walked in with a message from Grandmother Jia:

'Her Old Ladyship says please Miss Bao don't be too strict with Miss Qin; she's still only little and should he allowed to have her own way. And she says if there's anything Miss Qin wants, she shouldn't be afraid to ask for it.'

Bao-chai stood up politely to acknowledge the message. Afterwards she nudged Bao-qin playfully.

'I don't know! Some people have all the luck. You'd better leave us, hadn't you, before we start maltreating you? It beats me. What have you got that *I* haven't got?'

She was still teasing Bao-qin when Bao-yu and Dai-yu arrived. 'You say that in jest, Chai,' said Xiang-yun, noting their entry, but I know someone who really thinks that way.

'If anyone's really upset, it must be him,' said Amber, pointing her finger at Bao-yu.

Xiang-yun laughed at her simple-mindedness:

'No, he's not that sort of person..'

'Then if it's not *him* you mean, it must be *her,'* said Amber, pointing now at Dai--yu.

Xiang7yun fell silent. This time it was Bao-chai who spoke:

'Wrong again. She feels the same way about my cousin as I do. in fact, I believe if anything she's even fonder of her; so how *could* she be upset? Don't be taken in by Miss Shi's nonsense, my dear Amber. When did you ever hear Miss Shi say anything serious ?'

From past experience Bao-yu—who still knew nothing of Dai-yu and Bao-chai's recent rapprochement was too familiar with Dai-yu's jealous disposition not to feel apprehensive that Grandmother Jia's new partiality for Bao-qin might upset her. He was puzzled, therefore, by Bao-chai's rejoinder, and even more puzzled when he studied the expression on Dai-yu's face and found that, far from showing any trace of the resentment he would have expected, it exactly tallied with what Bao-chai had said.

'Those two used not to be like this,' he thought. 'Yet to judge from appearances, they are ten times friendlier towards each other now than they are towards anyone else.'

Shortly after this he heard Dai-yu calling Bao-qin 'dear' and fussing over her as if she were Bao-qin's elder sister.

Bao-qin was a young, warm-hearted creature; she was, moreover, highly intelligent and had been taught her letters from an early age. By the time she had been a couple of days in the ha household, she had already formed some impression of its members, Finding that her cousins were quite different from the vapid, giggling creatures to be found in the women's quarters of so many houses, she was soon on friendly terms with all of them and was careful not to show off; but in Dai-yu she recognized a superior intelligence, and consequently felt even more affection and respect for her than she did for any of the others. Hence the intimacy which Bao-yu had just witnessed. He studied the pair of them curiously and marveled in silence.

Shortly after this, when Bao-chai and Bao-qin had gone off to Aunt Xue's place and Xiang-yun had gone to see Grandmother Jia and Dai-yu had gone back to her own room to rest, Bao-Yu went after Dai-yu to question her.

'I've read *The Western Chamber,'* he said, 'and understood it well enough to have offended you on more than one occasion by quoting it at you; yet there's one line in it I still don't understand. Do you think, if I told you it, you could explain it-to me?'

Dai-yu realized that something must lie behind this request, nevertheless she smilingly promised that she would do her best.

'It comes in the section called "Ying-ying's Reply",' said Bao-yu:

'Since when did Meng Guang accept Lang Hong's tray?

The question seems rather an apposite one. Those two little words "since when" particularly intrigue me. Kindly expound them for me, will you? *Since when* did Meng Guang accept Liang Hong's tray?,

Dai-yu could not but be amused by the droll way in which he had gone about making his inquiry.

'That's a good question,' she said. 'It was a good question when Reddie asked it in the play, and it's a good question when you ask it now.'

'There was a time, -not so long past, when you might have been deeply offended by it,' said Bao-yu, 'yet now you say nothing.'

'It's because now I know she's a very good person,' said Dai-yu. 'Before I used to think she was two-faced.'

She proceeded to tell him, at some length, about the motherly talking to Bao-chai had given her after her lapses in the drinking game and about the gift of bird's nest and sugar and the long talk Bao-chai had had with her when she was ill.

'I see,' said Bao-yu. 'I needn't have been so puzzled then. It seems that the question

Since when did Meng Guang accept Liang Hong's tray?

could have been answered with another line from the same act of the same play. It was since you spoke

Like a child whose unbridled tongue knows no concealment!

Dai-yu went on to talk about Bao-qin, whom she evidently looked on as a younger sister. Alas, this only reminded her that she had no *real* sister of her own and 8he began to cry. Bao-yu would have none of this.

'Now come on, Dai! You're *making* yourself upset. Look at you! You're thinner than ever this year. It's because you won't take care of yourself. You positively *look* for ways of making yourself miserable. It's almost as though you felt you hadn't spent the day properly unless you'd had at least one good cry in it!'

'No,' said Dai-yu as she wiped her eyes. 'I feel very low these days, but I don't think cry as much as I used to.'

'I'm sure you *do,*' said Bao-yu. 'It's just that it's become so much a habit with you that you no longer know whether you're crying or not. I'm sure you cry just as much as you always did.'

Just then one of the maids from his room arrived carrying his **scarlet** felt rain-cape.

'Mrs Zhu has just sent someone round with a message for you, Master Bao,' said the maid.' She says it's starting to snow now and she wants to discuss with you about inviting people for the poetry meeting.'

She had barely finished speaking when Li Wan's emissary arrived to deliver the same message to Dai-yu. Bao-yu suggested that they should go to Sweet-rice Village together and waited while she put on a pair of little red-leather boots which had a gilded cloud pattern cut into their surface, a pelisse of heavy, dark-red bombasine lined with white fox-fur, a complicated woven belt made out of silvery **green** shot silk, and a snow-hat. The two of them then set off together through the snow.

They arrived to find that nearly all the others were there already, mostly in **red** felt or camlet snow-cloaks. The exceptions were Li Wan, who wore a simple greatcoat of plain woollen material buttoned down the front, Xue Bao-chai in a pelisse of ivy-**green** whorl-patterned brocade trimmed with some sort of exotic lamb's wool, and Xing Xiu-yan, who had no protection against the snow of any kind beyond the every day clothes she was wearing.

> Presently Xiang-yun arrived. She was wearing an enormous fur coat that Grandmother Jia had given her. The outside was made up of sables' heads and the inside lined with long-haired black squirrel. On her head was a dark-red camlet 'Princess' hood lined with **yellow** figured velvet, whose cut-out cloud shapes were bordered with gold, and round her neck, muffling her up to the nose, was a large sable tippet.

'Look, Monkey!' said Dai-yu, laughing at this furry apparition. 'Trust Yun to turn the need for wearing snow-clothes into an excuse for dressing up! She looks just like a Tartar groom!'

'You haven't seen what I am wearing underneath yet,' said Xiang-yun, and opened out the fur coat to show them.

She had on a short, narrow-sleeved, ermine-lined tunic jacket of russet **green,** edge-fastened down the centre front, purfled at neck and cuffs with a triple band of braiding in contrasting colours, and patterned all over with dragon-roundels embroidered in gold thread and coloured silks. Under this she was wearing a short riding-skirt of pale-red satin damask lined with white fox belly-fur. A court girdle of different-coloured silks braided into butterfly knots and ending in long silken tassels was tied tightly round her waist. Her boots were of deerskin. The whole ensemble greatly enhanced the somewhat masculine appearance of her figure with its graceful, athletic bearing.

The others laughed:

'She loves dressing up as a boy. Actually she looks even more fetching in boy's clothes than she does as a girl.'

'Let's get down to business,' said Xiang-yun. 'What *I* want to know is, who's paying for the entertainment this time?'

'Well, this is what *I* thought,' said Li Wan. 'We've already passed the date for our regular meeting, and we don't want to wait until the next one comes round, because it's too far ahead. As it's snowing, I thought it would be rather nice if we clubbed together for a little snow-party in honour of the newcomers and used it as an occasion for doing some poetry-making as well. What do the rest of you think ?'

'I think that's exactly what we should do,' said Bao-yu. 'The only thing is, it's a bit late for a party today, but if we wait until tomorrow, the snow may have stopped by then and it won't be so much fun.'

'It's very unlikely to,' said the others. 'And even if it has stopped by tomorrow morning, it will surely be snowing still tonight, so it should be well worth looking at in the morning.'

'This place here is all right, of course,' said Li Wan, 'but I thought that for this occasion it would be nicer if we met in Snowy Rushes Retreat. I've already told them to light the stove there and get the underground heating system started. I don't think Grandma would much like the idea of our sitting round the stove making verses, so, as it's only a very *little* party, I propose that we don't tell her about it. As long as we let Feng know, it should be sufficient. As regards contributions: if each of you will bring one tael to me here, it ought to be enough. Not you five;' she pointed to Caltrop, Bao-qin, Li Wen, Li Qi and Xiu-yan—'And Ying-chun and Xi-chun won't be contributing either. Ying-chun is ill and Xi-chun is on leave of absence. That leaves only Bao-chai, Dai-yu, Xiang-yun and Dai-yu. If you four will contribute one tael each, I will undertake to contribute five or six taels myself. Together that should be ample.'

Bao-chai and the other three promised to bring her their contributions later and went on to ask what titles and rhymes should be set for the poetry-making.

'I've already decided that,' said Li Wan. 'Let it be a surprise for you when you come.'

Arrangements for the party having now been settled, the cousins chatted together for a while longer before going off in a body to visit Grandmother Jia.

That concludes the narrative for that day,

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At first light next morning Bao-yu, who in excited anticipation of the day ahead had barely slept all night, crawled from the covers and lifted up a corner of the bed-curtain to inspect the weather. Although the doors and windows were still fastened, there was an ominous brightness about the latter which led him to conclude inwardly groaning with disappointment that the snow must have cleared and the sun be shining. Jumping out of bed, he opened one of the inner casements and looked through the glass. It was not the sun after all, he found, but the white gleam of snow. It had been snowing all night; there was a good foot of snow on the ground and it was still coming down in great, soft flakes, I like the flock from a torn-up quilt.

Overjoyed to find that he had been wrong, he at once began shouting for his maids, and as soon as he had finished washing and dressed himself in an aubergine-coloured gown lined with fox, a jacket with a sealskin shoulder-cape, and a belt round his waist for warmth, he donned his elegant rain-bat and cape (the Prince of Bei-jing's present that Dai-yu had so much admired), stepped into his pear wood patterns, and set off for Snowy

Rushes Retreat.

Once outside tile courtyard gate, the Garden stretched out on every hand in uniform whiteness, uninterrupted except for the dark **green** of a pine-tree or the lighter **green** of some bamboos here and there in the distance. He felt as if he was standing in the middle of a great glittering crystal bowl. Proceeding on his way, he had just turned a spur in the miniature mountain whose foot he was skirting, when his senses were suddenly ravished by a delicate cold fragrance. On looking around him, he found it to be coming from the dozen or so trees of winter-flowering **red** plum growing inside the walls of **Green** Bower Hermitage where the nun Adamantina lived. The brilliance of their carmine hue against the white background and the bravura of their blossoming amidst the snow so enchanted him that he stopped for some minutes to admire them.

As he moved on again, he saw someone carrying a **green** oiled-silk umbrella crossing over Wasp Waist Bridge. It was one of Li Wan's servants on her way to invite Xi-feng to the party.

Arriving at Snowy Rushes Retreat, be found several women-servants outside, sweeping a pathway up to the door.

Snowy Rushes Retreat was built at the water's margin in the shelter of a little hill. It had a thatched roof and adobe walls and a post-and-bar fence round it and bamboo-barred windows, just like a farmhouse or a peasant's cottage. By merely opening a casement and leaning out, it was possible to fish in the lake from its rear windows. Reeds and rushes grew all around it. A meandering pathway through them led to the bamboo bridge by which Lotus Pavilion could be approached from the back.

When the snow-sweepers caught sight of Bao-yu in his rain hat and cape, they paused from their labours and laughed.

'We were just saying a moment ago that all we need now is an old fisherman, and here he comes! You're too impatient, Master: the young ladies won't be coming until they've eaten.'

Hearing that, there was nothing for Bao-yu to do but go back again.

Looking out from Drenched Blossoms Pavilion while he was crossing over the bridge, he caught sight of his sister Tan-chun emerging from Autumn Studio. She was wearing a dark-red camlet cloak and Guanyin hood and leaning on the arm of a little maid. A woman-servant walked behind her carrying a **green** oiled-silk umbrella. Realizing that she must be on her way to see Grandmother *Jia*, Bao-yu waited by the pavilion for her to catch up with him and accompanied her out of the Garden.

When they arrived, Bao-qin was still at her toilet in the inner room. The other cousins joined them shortly after. Bao-yu kept telling everyone how hungry he felt and grumbling because the servants were so long in serving. When the food at last arrived, the first dish to be put on the table was unborn lamb stewed in milk.

'That's a health food,' said Grandmother Jia. 'It's for old folk like me. I'm afraid you young people couldn't eat it. It's a creature that's never seen the light. There's some fresh venison today, though. Why don't you wait and have some of that?'

The others agreed to wait, but Bao-yu professed himself unable to hold out, and helping himself to a bowl of plain boiled rice, poured a little tea over it and shovelled it straight from the bowl into his mouth with one or two collops of pickled pheasant-meat to help it down.

'I know you've got something on today,' said Grandmother Jia. 'That's why you've no time to eat properly.' She turned to the servants. 'Save some of the venison for them to eat in the evening.'

'There's plenty more,' said Xi-feng. 'I've already spoken to them about it.'

Xiang-yun had a brief consultation on the subject with Bao-yu:

'If they've got fresh venison, why don't we ask for a piece and cook it ourselves in the Garden? That would

be fun.'

Bao-yu eagerly took up her suggestion and begged a piece from Xi-feng. He got one of the women to take it into the Garden for them.

Presently, when they had all left Grandmother Jia's place and reassembled in Snowy Rushes Retreat an-d were waiting to hear what themes and rhymes Li Wan had decided on, they noticed that Xiang-yun and Bao-yu were missing.

'Those two should never be allowed together,' said Dai-yu. 'As soon as ever they get together there is some kind of mischief afoot. No doubt the reason they've gone off this time is because they have designs on that deer's meat.'

Just then Li Wan's aunt, Mrs Li, came in, drawn by the noise and numbers to see what was happening.

'That boy with the jade and the girl with the gold kylin,' she said to Li Wan anxiously, 'they both seem such clean, well-bred children, and they *look* as if they had enough to eat, yet just now the two of them were discussing how to eat a piece of raw venison. They seemed to he quite serious about it, too. *Can* one eat venison raw? I find it hard to believe that it can be very good for you.'

'Shocking I' exclaimed the others. 'Better go out and stop them.'

'Yun is at the bottom of this,' said Dai-yu. 'Mark my words!'

Li Wan hurried off to find the culprits.

'If you are proposing to eat raw meat,' she said when she had found them, 'I shall have to send you back to Grandma's to do it there. You can take a whole deer and stuff yourselves sick on it as long as it's not my responsibility. Come on, now! Come back and make verses with the rest of us. Out in all this snow—it's *much* too cold!'

'You're absolutely mistaken,' said Bao-yu, laughing. 'We're planning to roast it.'

'Oh *well'* said Li Wan, 'that's different.'

Some old women arrived just then, carrying an iron stove, some metal skewers and a grill.

'Now be careful about cutting that meat,' said Li Wan. 'If you cut your fingers, you'll have nobody to blame but yourselves I'

Having uttered that warning, she went indoors again.

Not long after she had gone in, Patience came by on her way to the Retreat. Xi-feng had sent her, in response to Li Wan's invitation, to explain that she was unable to join them because she was busy seeing to the various annual payments that fall due at this time of year. Xiang-yun stopped her to exchange greetings, and having once stopped her, was unwilling to let her go again. Patience was by nature a fun-loving girl and she knew that Xi-feng would generally let her do as she liked. Considering the idea of cooking outdoors a great lark, she entered into the spirit of the thing, and taking off her bracelets, joined the other two round the brazier and asked for three of the cut-up pieces of venison to roast.

Bao-chai and Dai-yu had seen this kind of thing before and were not particularly interested, but it was a novelty to Mrs Li and Bao-qin and the newcomers, and they were greatly intrigued.

'What a lovely smell!' said Tan-chun, when she and Li Wan had finished discussing the theme for the verse-making. 'You can smell it from here. I'm going outside to have some.'

She went out to join the three around the brazier. Li Wan followed her.

'Everyone's ready and waiting,' said Li Wan. 'Haven't you two finished eating yet?'

'I need wine to inspire my verse,' said Xiang-yun, speaking with a mouth full of venison, 'and eating roast venison gives me a thirst for wine. So if I didn't eat this venison, I shouldn't be able to write any poetry for you.'

She caught sight of Bao-qin, in the beautiful drake's head cloak that Caltrop had thought was made of peacock's feathers, hanging back somewhat from the rest and smiling wistfully.

'Thoppy!' she called out to her. 'Come and try thome!'

'Too dirty!' said Bao-qin.

'Go and try some,' Bao-chai urged her. 'It's very good. The only reason your Cousin Lin isn't having any is because she's delicate and can't digest it. If it weren't for that, she would love to have some herself.'

Hearing this, Bao-qin went over and nibbled a bit, and finding it good, began to tuck in with as much gusto as the rest.

Presently a little maid arrived from Xi-feng summoning Patience to return; but Patience told the girl to go back without her and tell her mistress that she was being detained by Miss Shi. Shortly after the maid's departure Xi-feng herself arrived, with a rain-cape over her shoulders.

'This looks good,' she said jovially. 'You might have told me!'

With that she joined the other five in their alfresco feast round the brazier

'You look like a party of down-and-outs,' said Dai-yu. 'Oh dear, oh dear! Poor Snowy Rushes Retreat, polluted by Butcher Yun and her reeking carnivores! I weep for you!'

'What *do you* know about it?' said Xiang-yun scornfully. '"True wits make elegant whate'er they touch." Yours is a false purity. *Odious* purity! Now we may reek and raven; but presently you will see us with the pure spirit of poetry in our breasts and the most delicate, silken phrases On our lips!'

'You'd better see to it that the verses you make *are* good ones,' said Bao-chai, laughing, 'otherwise we shall make you expiate the pollution by plucking the venison from your insides and stuffing you with snowy rushes!'

They had now made an end of eating, and washed their hands. In putting on her bracelets again, Patience noticed that one of them was missing; but though she and the others looked all around them, they were unable to find it. They were still puzzling over its disappearance when Xi-feng smilingly put an end to the search:

'I know where the bracelet's gone. You others go in and get on with your poetry.'

'There's no need to look for it any longer,' she told Patience. 'You will have to go home without it; but I promise that within three days from now you shall have it back again.'

'What are your poems to be about this time ?' she asked the cousins. 'Grandma says that as it's getting near the end of the year, we shall soon be needing some First Month lantern riddles.'

'Ah yes, of course!' they said. 'We'd quite forgotten, We'd better make some good ones up in advance to have ready for the festival.'

During this exchange they had been trooping into the room in the Retreat which had the under-floor heating. Wine-cups and prepared dishes had been laid there in readiness by the servants. A paper stuck to the wall announced the theme, form and rhyme for the forthcoming poetry contest. Bao-yu and Xiang-yun, who had not yet seen it, quickly went over to look. This is what it said:

Theme: The Snow
Form: Linked Pentameters
Rhyme: Eyes

No order of composition had been indicated.

'I'm not much good at poetry myself,' said Li Wan, 'so I shall merely start you off by giving you the first three lines. After that, whoever is the first to think of a good following line can carry on.'

‘I think we ought to have a fixed order,’ said Bao-chai. As to whether or not her advice was taken, that will be made clear in the following chapter.

CHAPTER 50

Linked verses in Snowy Rushes Retreat
And lantern riddles in the Spring In Winter Room

‘I THINK We ought to have a fixed order,’ said Bao-chai. ‘Just let me write the names down and we can decide what it is to be by lot.’

When she had written down their names and torn up the paper, the slips were drawn and she copied them down in the order in which they came out. Li Wan, by coincidence, retained the first place.

‘If *this* is what you are doing,’ said Xi-feng, ‘I may as well contribute a line of my own to start you off with.’

‘Yes, yes,’ said the others. ‘Please do!’

Bao-chai added the name ‘ Feng’ to the list, above that of ‘Farmer Sweet-rice’, while Li Wan explained what the subject was and what sort of line it had to be. Xi-feng listened attentively and thought for some moments before speaking.

‘You mustn’t laugh if this sounds a bit unpolished,’ she said at last, ‘but at least I think it’s the right length. Mind you, I’ve no idea how it could go on.’

‘Never mind how unpolished it is,’ they said. ‘just tell us what it is; then you can leave, if you want to, and get on with your own work.’

‘Well, when it snows, there’s always a north wind,’ said Xi-feng, ‘and last night I could hear the north wind blowing all night long; so I’ve made a line up about that:

Last night the north wind blew the whole night through.

There you are—take it or leave it!’

The others ‘looked at each other in pleased surprise.

‘Even if the language of this line *is* a bit unpolished and you *can’t* see what’s going to follow it, it’s exactly the kind of line that a skilled poet would begin with. Not only is the line good in itself, but it leaves so many possibilities open to the person who follows. Put that down for our first line then, Sweet-rice, *and you* can finish the couplet.’

Before they proceeded any further, however, Xi-feng, Mrs Li and Patience drank two cups of wine with them, after which they left. As soon as they had gone, Li Wan wrote out the line that Xi-feng had given them, adding a line of her own to make it into a couplet and a third line after that to make the beginning of a second couplet. Thereafter, as each of them in turn completed the couplet started by the previous person and then added the first line of another couplet, she continued to write down the lines at their dictation:

XI-FENG:

Last night the north wind blew the whole night through—

LI WAN:

Today outside my door the snow still flies.
On mud and dirt its pure white flakes fall down—
CALTROP:
And powdered jade the whole earth beautifies.
Flakes on the dead plants weave a winter dress—
TAN-CHUN:
And on dry grasses gemlike crystallize.
Now will the farmer's brew a good puce fetch—
LI QI
His full barn to a good year testifies.
The ash-filled gauge shows winter's solstice near—
LI WEN:
And the Wain turns as Yang revivifies.
Snow robs the cold bills of their emerald hue—
XIU-YAN:
And frost the river's motion petrifies.
Snow settles thickly on sparse willow boughs—
XIANG-YUN:
But on dead plantain-leaves less easy lies.
Now perfumed coals in precious braziers burn—
BAO-QIN:
And heavy furs the girls' slim shapes disguise.
Firelight the mirror by the window catches—
DAI-YU:
And burning nard the chamber purifies.
Still sobbing through the night the mournful wind—
BAO-YU:
Each sleeper's dreams with sadness sanctifies.
Somewhere a melancholy flute is playing—
BAO-CHAI:
Whose sad notes with the wind's plaint harmonize.
With groans the Earth Turtle sideways shifts his load—

At this point Li Wan laid down her brush and rose to her feet.

'I think I'll just slip out and see about getting some more wine heated. Someone else can take my place.'

Ban-chai took up the writing-brush and called on Bao-qin to complete the couplet; but before she could do so, Xiang-yun had leapt to her feet with two lines of her own:

XIANG-YUN:
As dragons brawl, the cloud-wrack liquefies.
A lone boat from the lonely shore puts out—

Nothing daunted, Bao-qin completed *that* couplet instead:

DAO-QIN:

While from the bridge a horseman waves good-byes.

Now warm clothes to the frontier are dispatched—

Xiang-yun would yield to no one; and her invention was so much quicker than anyone else's, that they were content to let her break the order, and watched with amusement as she returned now, exulting, to the attack:

XIANG-YUN:

And wives to distant dear ones send supplies.

On still untrodden ways masked pitfalls threaten—

'That's a good line!' said Bao-chai admiringly as she wrote down what Xiang-yun had recited; and she followed with two lines of her own:

BAO-CHAI:

In snowbound woods a bough's creak terrifies.

The wind-blown snow around the traveller whirls—

Dai-yu hurriedly followed:

DAI-YU:

And clouds of powdery snow at each step rise.

Steamed taros makes a good snow-party fare—

She nudged Bao-yu to follow: but Bao-yu was so absorbed in watching the contest that seemed to be developing between Xiang-yun on the one hand and Bao-qin, Bao-chai and Dai-yu on the other, that he was failing to think up lines of his own to follow their half-couplets with. He did the best he could, however, in response to Dai-yu's nudge:

BAO--YU:

The guests on 'scattered salt' themes improvise.

Now is the woodman's axe no longer heard—

Clear off, you—you're no good!' said Xiang-yun, laughing. 'All you're doing is getting in other people's way!'

Her pausing to say this gave Bao-qin an opportunity of cutting in:

BAO-QIN:

Yet still his rod the straw-clad fisher plies.

Mountains like sleeping elephants appear—

Xiang-yun hurried back into the fray:

XIANG-YUN:

A snake-like path the climber's skill defies.

After long cold the trees strange frost-fruits bear—

This evoked admiring murmurs from Bao-chai and the rest.
Tan-chun managed to get in a contribution at this point:

TAN-HUN:
Which, bold in beauty, winter's blasts despise.
The hushed yard startles to a cold chough's chatter—

Xiang-yun was ready at once with two lines to follow, but as she was feeling thirsty, she first stopped to gulp down some tea. In doing so, she lost her turn to Xiu-yan:

XIU-YAN:
An old owl wakes the vale with mournful cries.
The driving flakes make angles disappear—

Xiang-yun put down her teacup in a hurry, before more ground could be lost:

XIAN-G-YUN:
But dimples on -the water's face incise.
In the clear morn how radiant gleams the snow!—

Dai-yu followed:

DAI-YU:
How ghostly, as the too short daylight dies!
Its cold the Chengs' disciples could withstand—

Xiang-yun laughed excitedly as she hurried to complete the couplet:

XIANG-YUN:
Its promise can a king's cares exorcise.
Who'd lie abed all stiff with cold indoors—

Bao-qin laughed, too, as she followed:

BAO-QIN:
When friends invite to red-cheeked exercise?
Who o'er the land the merfolk's silk unrolls—?

Xiang-yun quickly capped this:

XIANG-YUN:

Who the white weft from Heaven’s loom unties?

But before she could begin another couplet, Dai-yu slipped in a line of her own:

DAI-YU:
Tall tiled pavilions cold and-empty stand—

Xiang-yun capped it:

XIANG-YUN:
Snug -thatch more favour finds in poor men’s eyes.

Bao-qin, concluding that this was now a free-for-all, -cut in with ?he next half couplet:

BAO-QIN:
Ice lumps we thaw and boil to make our tea Xiang-yun, having evidently thought of something amusing, began to giggle:

XIANG-YUN:
The fuel being damp, they greatly tantalize.

Dai-yu began to giggle too:

DAI-Y-U:
The Zen recluse with non-broom sweeps the ground—

The infection of giggles had now reached Bao-qin:

BAO-QIN:
His stringless lute-play still more mystifies.

Xiang-yun was by now so doubled up with laughter that the others could not make out the words of her next line.

‘*What?* ‘they asked her. ‘*What* was that you said?’ Xiang-yun had to repeat it:

XIANG-YUN:
On the stone tower a stork unwatchful sleeps—

Dai-yu was laughing so much that -she had to clutch painfully at her chest and the words she recited came out in a laughing shout:

DAI-YU:

On the warm mat a cat contented sighs.

All the lines that followed were uttered in rapid succession and to the accompaniment of much laughter.

BAO-QIN:
In moonlit caves the silvery water laps—

XIANG-YUN:
And **red** flags flutter against sunset skies.

DAI-YU:
Soaked winter plums make the breath fresh and sweet—

'That's a good line,' said Bao-chai. She capped it herself:

BAO-CHAI:
And melted snow the wine-fumes neutralize.

BAO-QIN:
The stiffened aigrette gradually thaws—

XIANG-YUN:
The snow-soaked silken girdle slowly dries.

DAI-YU:
The wind has dropped, but snow still wetly falls—

Bao-qin capped this, laughing:

BAO-QIN:
And frequent drips the passer-by baptize.

Xiang-yun had collapsed, weak with laughing, upon Bao-chai's shoulder. The others had long since given up trying to participate and become mere laughing spectators of the three-cornered contest between Xiang-yun, Dai-yu and Bao-qin. Dai-yu urged Xiang-yun to go on.

'Don't tell me you've run out of inspiration—! Surely your famous gift of the gab is still good for a few more lines?'

Bao-chai prodded Xiang-yun, who was now laughing helplessly upon her lap.

'See if you can exhaust the rhyme, Yun. If you can do that, I shall be *really* impressed.'

'This isn't verse-making,' said Xiang-yun, raising her head from Bao-chai's lap, it's more like a duel to the death!'

'Well, whose fault is that?' they asked her, laughing.

Tan-chun, having decided that she would be unlikely to make any further contributions herself, had some time before this taken over the task of amanuensis from Bao-chai. She now pointed out -that the poem needed finishing off. Li Wan, who had just arrived back, took the paper from her and embarked on a suitable finishing couplet:

LI WAN:
Our verses shall this happy day record—

Her cousin Li Qi completed it:

LI QI
And a wise Emperor loyally eulogize.

'Now that's enough;' said Li Wan. 'We still haven't exhausted the rhyme, but if we go on any longer, we shall be tying ourselves up in knots trying to use words that aren't really suitable.'
They now went over the whole poem from beginning to end and discussed it all in detail. It appeared that Xiang-yun had contributed far mote lines than anyone else, The others laughed.
'It's because of all that venison you ate!'
'If we consider quality rather than quantity,' said Li Wan, 'I think all the contributions are of about equal merit. Except Bao-yu's, of course. *He* goes to the bottom of the list, as usual.'
'I can't do Linked Verses, anyway,' said Bao-yu. 'You have to make allowances for me.'
'That's all very well,' said Li Wan, smiling, 'but we can't make allowances for you at every single meeting. One time you're in trouble because we have fixed rhymes, another time you fail to turn up altogether, and this time you tell us you "can't do Linked Verses "I think this time there really has to be a penalty. I noticed just now that the **red** plum in **Green** Bower Hermitage is very fine. I'd like to have broken off a branch to put in a vase, but I find Adamantina such a difficult person that I prefer not to have anything to do with her. The first part of your punishment shall be to get us a branch of that **red** plum and put it in a vase here where all of us can admire it.'
'What a delightful penalty!' said the others. 'How civilized!'
Bao-yu, too, was delighted with the penalty, but just as he was setting off to perform it, Xiang-yun and Dai-yu simultaneously rose to their feet and detained him.
'It's very, very cold outside. Have a cup of hot wine before you go.'
Xiang-yun already had the wine-kettle in her hand. Dai-yu found an extra large cup for her to pour the wine in.
'There!' said Xiang-yun, filling it up to the brim. 'If you come back empty-handed now, after drinking our wine, we shall double the rest of your penalty when you get back!'

Bao-yu quickly drank down the proffered cup of freshly heated wine and walked out into the snow. Li Wan wanted to send a servant out after him, but Dai-yu intervened.
'I wouldn't, if I were you. If he has anyone else with him, he won't be able to get any.'
Knowing Adamantina, Li Wan reflected that this was probably true and nodded. She sent the maids to fetch a large *mei*ping vase with wide shoulders and a very narrow neck to put the plum-blossom in when it arrived.

'When he comes back, we must compose some **red** plum poems,' she said.
'I can do one now,' said Bao-qin.
'Oh no!' said Bao-chai. 'We're not letting yon do any more. You've already hogged enough turns for today. It's

no fun for the others if they are left with nothing to do. No, it's Bao-yu's penalty we've got to think about, He said just now that he can't do Linked Verses. When he comes back we ought to make him do some other kind of verses for us by himself.'

'Good ideal' said Dai-yu. 'And I've got another idea. Several people didn't get sufficient opportunity in the Linked Verses of showing what they can do. I propose that those who contributed least in the Linked Verses should be given the **red** plum poems to do?

'Yes, I agree,' said Bao-chai. 'Cousin Xing, Cousin Wen and Cousin Qi were practically crowded out altogether—and they are, after all, our guests. Qin and Yun and you, Frowner, hogged nearly all the turns. This time the rest of us ought to keep out of it and let Cousin Xing and Cousin Wen and Cousin Qi have the floor to themselves.'

'Qi isn't very good at making verses,' said Li Wan. 'I think you'd better give *her* place to your cousin Bao-qin.'

This was scarcely what Bao-chai had intended, but she felt herself in no position to dissent.

'Why don't we use the words "red plum flower" as rhymes?' she suggested. 'Each of the three can do an octet on "Red Plum Flower", but Cousin Xing can use "red" for her rhyme, Cousin Wen can use "plum" for hers, and Qin can use flower".'

'We seem to be letting off Bao-yu,' said Li Wan. 'I can't agree to that.'

'Give him a separate theme,' Xiang-yun suggested.

'What theme shall we give him?' the others asked.

'What about "On Visiting the Nun Adamantina with a Request for **Red** Plum blossom"?' said Xiang-yun. 'That might be interesting.'

'Oh yes!' said the others. 'That would do splendidly.'

At that very moment the object of their discussion walked in, smiling triumphantly, with a flowering plum-branch in his hand. The maids at once relieved him of it and put it in the waiting vase, while the cousins crowded round them to admire it.

'I hope you enjoy it, all -of you,' said Bao-yu. 'It took me enough trouble to get!'

Tan-chun handed him a cup of hot wine to revive him; but first the maids removed his cape and rain hat and shook the snow off them.

Maids from several different apartments now began arriving with extra-clothing for their mistresses. Bao-yu's Aroma sent him an old surtout lined with fox's belly-fur. Li Wan made the

servants fill three dishes, one with extra large steamed taros, the other two with blood-**orange**s, **yellow** Canton **orange**s and olives, to take back to her.

Xiang-yun now told Bao-yu the title of the poem they wanted him to compose and urged him to begin thinking a bout it.

'I will,' said Bao-yu; 'but there's just one thing I would ask of you all: please let me use my own rhymes ; *please* don't make me do it to set rhymes.'

'All right,' said the girls. 'Use whatever rhymes you like.' They had been admiring the plum-blossom meanwhile. The vertical part of the branch—the part, that is, which was stuck into the neck of the vase—must have been less than two feet high; but growing at right-angles from the top of it was a side branch which rose and fell in a spreading cascade of blossom all of four feet long. Of the branchlets forming this flowery cascade

some were like writhing serpents,
some were like frozen worms;

some were as straight and smooth as a writing-brush,
some were as densely twigged as a tiny coppice.

As for the blossoms, they had

A colour like the rosy lips of love
And scent that made summer's scents seem uninviting.

While the others-were studying the blossoming branch and praising its beauties, Xing Xiu-yan, Li Wen and Bao-qin were busy composing their poems about it and presently began writing them out for the others to inspect.

This is what the others were now able to read:

*On a Branch of **Red** Plum Flower*

I

Rhyming **'red'** By Xing Xiu-yan

So brave, so gay they bloom in winter's cold,
Before the fragrant peach and almond red;
Like rosy clouds that clothe the springtime slopes
Of Yu-ling, where my dream-soul oft has sped.
Each little lamp in its **green** calyx lies
Like drunken snow-sprite on a rainbow bed.
Yet do these flowers, of hue so rich and rare,
Reckless, in ice and snow their charms outspread.

II

Rhyming 'plum' By Li Wen

What richness blooms before my drunken eyes?
'Tis not the white I sing, but the **red** plum.
See, its pale cheeks are streaked with blood-red tears,
Even though its bitter heart with cold is numb.
No flower this, but a fairy maid transformed
And here transplanted from Elysium
In this bleak North it makes such brave display,
I'll tell the bees that spring's already come.

III

Rhyming 'flower' By Xue Bao-qin

Like spendthrift youths in spring's new fashions dressed,

Its bare thin branches burst in glorious flower.
Snow no more falls, but a bright rosy cloud
Tints hills and streams in one long sunset hour.
Through this **red** flood my dream-boat makes its way,
While flutes sound chill from many a maiden's bower.
Sure from no earthly stock this beauty came,
But trees immortal round the Fairy Tower.

They read these poems with smiles of pleasure. There were words of praise for all three of them; but Bao-qin's, they finally agreed, was the best of the three. Bao-yu, realizing that she was the youngest present, was greatly impressed. Dai-yu and Xiang-yun between them poured out a tiny cupful of wine and offered it to her in celebration of her victory.

'All three were *equally* good,' Bao-chai deprecatingly.

'It was you two who in the past were always fooling *me* that poems were the best. Now, it appears, you've found someone else to fool.'

'What about *you?'* Li Wan asked Bao-yu. 'Is *yours* ready yet?'

'I *did* have one ready,' said Bao-yu, 'but these three are so much better that reading them has made me nervous and put it completely out of my mind. You'll have to give me a bit longer while I think up another.'

Xiang-yun picked up one of a pair of large bronze chopsticks used as tongs for feeding the stove with and beat a preliminary tattoo with it on her metal hand-warmer.

'I'll drum for you;' she said 'If you can't produce something each time the drumming stops, we'll double your penalty.'

'I think I've got something,' said Bao-yu. Dai-yu picked up a writing-brush, 'I'll write it down for you while you recite it,' she said. Xiang-yun struck up a tattoo.

'Right!' she said presently, as she stopped her drumming. 'End of first round.'

'Yes, I've got something,' said Bao-yu. 'Get ready to write.'

'Wine not yet broached nor verses yet composed—'

Dai-yu wrote down the words, shaking her head as she did so.

'That's a very indifferent beginning.'

'Come on!' said Xiang-yun. 'Hurry!' Bao-yu continued:

'In quest of spring I sped to Elysium—

Dai-yu and Xiang-yun nodded.

'Hmn. Not bad.'

Bao-yu went on:

"Twas not the balm from Guanyin's vase I craved
Across that threshold, but her flowering plum—,

Dai-yu -shook her bead again as she wrote this down.

'That's a bit contrived, isn't it?'

Xiang--yun began-another tattoo on the hand-warmer. When she finished, Bao-yu continued at once:

'A frozen worldling, for **red** flowers I begged;
The saint cut fragrant clouds and gave me some.
Pity my verse so angular and thin,
For convent snow has soaked it to the skin!'

As soon as Dai-yu had finished writing this down, Xiang-yan and the rest began a critical discussion of the whole poem. They were till in the midst of this when a little maid dashed in to announce that Grandmother Jia was approaching. Bao-yu and the girls hurried out, laughing and chattering, to welcome her.

'She must be feeling in good spirits,' they said, 'to come out in the snow like this.'

Grandmother Jia was still quite a way off when they saw her. She was sitting in a little bamboo carrying-chair and holding a **green** silk umbrella over herself. A large cape and squirrel-lined hood almost completely enveloped her. Faithful, Amber and three or four other maids, all carrying their own umbrellas, formed a little escort around the chair and its bearers. Li Wan and the others would have gone out into the snow to meet her, but Grandmother Jia called out to them to stay where they were.

'Wait there under cover. I'll come over *to you.'*

'I've given Feng and your Aunt Wang the slip,' she told them, chuckling mischievously, when the chair had reached them and they were helping her out of it. It's all right for *me*, going out in all this snow, because I'm sitting in *this* thing; but I didn't want them trudging along in the snow beside me, getting cold and miserable.'

Some of them relieved her of her snow-clothes while others supported her on either -side and conducted her into the room where the heated kang was.

'What pretty plum-blossom!' she said as they entered it. 'You children certainly know bow to enjoy yourselves. I feel quite angry with you for not inviting me!'

Li Wan made the servants bring in a big wolfskin rug and spread it out in the middle of the kang for Grandmother Jia to sit on.

'Now you just all go on enjoying yourselves exactly as you were before I came,' said the old lady when she had settled herself on the rug. 'I daren't sleep after lunch at this time of year, because the days are so short. I had a little game of dominoes instead; then I started wondering what you were all up to and thought I would come over and join you.'

Li Wan handed her a hand-warmer while Tan-chun fetched a winecup and a pair of chopsticks, poured out a cup of warm wine, and offered it to her with both her hands. Grandmother Jia accepted it from her and sipped the wine.

'What have you got in that dish over there?' she asked them.

'Pickled quails,' said one of the cousins, bringing the dish over for her inspection.

'That will do very nicely,' said Grandmother Jia. 'Tear off a little leg for me, will you?'

Li Wan called for water, and having first washed her hands, performed the operation for her in person.

'Now I want you all to sit down again and go on talking,' said Grandmother Jia. 'It does me good to hear you. —You too,' she said to Li Wan. 'You're to sit down as well. I want you to behave exactly as if I hadn't come. Otherwise I shall go away again.'

At this the others resumed their former places—all except bearers turned into this and put the chair down just inside it for Grandmother Jia to get out. Xi-chun was already waiting there to welcome her and conducted them all through the covered way which ran round the sides of the courtyard from the gateway to her living quarters at the back. A framed board hanging underneath the eaves announced the name of the building:

SPRING IN WINTER.

Servants held up the **red** felt portiere for them as they approached its doorway. They could feel the hot air fanning their cheeks as they entered it.

Grandmother Jia tackled Xi-chun as soon as .they were inside, not even waiting to sit down.

'What's happened to the painting?'

'The glue gets tacky in this cold weather,' said Xi-chun. 'It stops the paint from going on properly. I've put the painting away because I was afraid it might get spoiled.'

Grandmother Jia brushed aside this excuse with a dismissive laugh.

'I want that painting ready by the end of the year. Don't be so lazy! Fetch it out at once and get on with it, my girl!'

Just then a smiling Xi-feng made her appearance. A purplish woollen gabardine was thrown loosely over her shoulders.

'You've led me a fine dance,' she grumbled, 'sneaking off on your own like this!'

The old lady was delighted to see her.

'I didn't want you all catching colds; that's why I told them not to let you know I was going out. I suppose I ought to have realized that that sharp little nose of yours would soon ferret me out again. You mustn't think you are being dutiful in tracking me down like this.'

'Being dutiful!' said Xi-feng. 'That's not at all the reason why I came out to look for you. Just now when I went round to your apartment I found it all deathly quiet, and it was quite clear from the maids' answers, when I tried to find out where you had gone, that they didn't want me to go into the Garden to look for you. That aroused my suspicions; and when a moment later a couple of nuns appeared on the scene, my suspicions were confirmed: I realized that they must have come to make their annual collection for some charity or other and that my dear, saintly Grannie, who no doubt has rather a *lot* of subscriptions to pay out at this time of year, had gone into hiding to avoid them. I asked the nuns, and sure enough it was for your annual subscription that they had come. I paid it for you myself. So now your creditors have gone, you can come out of hiding. You ought to be getting back now in any case. You've got some nice, tender pheasant for dinner and if you leave it much longer it will spoil.'

All this was spoken, of course, to the accompaniment of much laughter from the others. Before Grandmother *Jia* could say anything in reply, Xi-feng had ordered the bearers to bring up the bamboo carrying-chair and Grandmother Jia, in laughing acquiescence, took Xi-feng's hand, got back into it, and was at once lifted up and whisked away by the bearers. The others followed after, chattering and laughing as they went.

As they emerged from the east end of the alley-way into the silvery snowscape of the Garden, they could see Bao-qin, identifiable by the glossy **green** mallard-cape, standing a long way off behind the shoulder of a little hill, waiting for the rest of them to arrive. A maid, hugging a large vase with a branch of **red** plum in it, was standing behind her.

‘So *there* she is!’ said the others. ‘We *thought* there seemed to be two of us missing. And she’s got herself some plum blossom, as well.’

Grandmother Jia smiled proprietorially at the distant figure.

‘What does that remind you all of, seeing her there on that snowy bank, wearing a cape like that and with the spray of plum-blossom behind her?’

‘Why,’ they said, ‘it’s like that painting by Qiu Ying you have hanging in your room: “The Beauty of the Snow”.’

Grandmother Jia shook her head.

‘No, the girl in that picture isn’t wearing a cape like that—and she isn’t half as pretty as Qin, either.’

Just at that moment a third figure, previously invisible, stepped out from behind Bao-qin’s back. Whoever it was was wearing a **red** felt snow-cape.

‘Which of the girls is that?’ said Grandmother Jia.

‘There aren’t any more girls; we’re all here,’ said the others laughing. ‘That’s Bao-yu.’

‘My eyes are getting worse and worse,’ said Grandmother Jia. Soon they had caught up with the three figures on the hill and she could see that it was indeed Bao-yu whom she had failed to recognize with Bao-qin and the maid.

‘I’ve been over to **Green** Bower Hermitage again,’ Bao-yu told the girls. ‘Adamantina ended up by giving me a branch of plum-blossom for each of you. I’ve just been arranging to have them delivered to your rooms.’

The others thanked him for his kindness.

Talking as they went, they presently passed through the gate of the Garden and accompanied Grandmother Jia back to her apartment. After dinner, while they were still sitting there in conversation, Aunt Xue arrived.

‘*What* a heavy fall of snow!’ she said. ‘I haven’t been able to come over and see you all day long. You ought to go out and have a look at it, Lady Jia, if you are feeling low. It would do you good.’

‘Who said I was feeling low?’ said Grandmother Jia with some amusement. ‘I’ve only just got back from visiting the children. I’ve been having a fine old time!’

‘Oh?’ said Aunt Xue. ‘Yesterday evening I was intending to ask if my sister and I could have the use of the Garden today so that we might arrange a little snow-viewing party for you, but you’d already gone to bed, and Bao-chai said that you were feeling out of Sorts, so I thought I’d better not bother you. If I’d known differently, I’d have come round this morning and invited you.’

‘We’re only just into the eleventh month,’ said Grandmother Jia. ‘There’ll be plenty more snow yet and plenty more opportunities for taking advantage of your kind offer.’

‘I do hope so,’ said Aunt Xue. ‘It’s something I should very much like to do for you.’

‘Isn’t there a danger you might forget, Aunt?’ *said* Xi-feng. ‘Why not weigh out fifty taels now and leave them with me? Then next time it snows, I can get it all ready *for* you. That would save you the trouble of arranging it yourself and also avoid the danger of your forgetting.’

‘In that case you and I might just as well split the money between us,’ said Grandmother Jia. ‘Next time it snows, all I have to do is say that I’m feeling out of sorts, and you won’t have to do anything at all. That way Mrs Xue will have even less trouble, while you and I will each of us have twenty-five taels cleat profit.’

Xi-feng clapped her hands delightedly.

‘What a wonderful idea! Why didn’t I think of it myself?’

The others laughed.

‘Shameless hussy!’ said Grandmother Jia, laughing with the rest. ‘You’re-like the monkey on the pole: give you an inch and you take an ell. What you *ought* to have said is: “No, Aunt, you are our guest Since you honour us by

staying in our house, it is *we* who should be inviting you. We can't allow *you* to go spending money on *us.*" That's what you ought to have said; not asked your poor aunt for fifty taels. Whoever heard of such a thing!'

'She's a canny old lady, this Grandma of ours,' Xi-feng explained to Aunt Xue. 'She watches you first to see if you'll weaken or not. If you'd weakened and coughed up the fifty taels, she'd have been quite willing to go halves with me and pocket twenty-five of them herself; but having gauged that you probably won't, she adopts a holier-than-thou attitude and makes an example of *me,* even though she was the one who suggested it. All right, all right. I'll pay for the whole party myself, and when Grandma arrives, I'll have fifty taels out of my own savings wrapped up all ready to give her as a present. That shall be my punishment for having opened my big mouth and occupied myself with other people's affairs.'

Bao-yu and the girls were by this time rolling about on the kang.

Presently, when the conversation got round to what a beautiful picture Bao-qin had made standing in the snow with the spray of plum-blossom behind her, Grandmother Jia began inquiring about her parentage and the exact day and hour of her birth. Aunt Xue guessed that she was considering her as a possible match for Bao-yu. She would have been glad enough to go along with this had not Bao-qin already been promised to the Meis; however, since Grandmother Jia had not asked her outright, she could do no more than hint at a prior attachment.

'She's been very unlucky, poor child. The year before last her father died quite suddenly. She used to go with him every-where on his travels, so she has seen a great deal of the world for one so young. Her father was a great one for combining business with pleasure. He always took the family with him when he went away on business. They would spend perhaps a whole year in one province, seeing all the sights; then the next six months they might spend travelling around in another. At one time and another they must have covered well over half the provinces of the Empire in that way. While he was on one of his trips to the capital, he promised her to Academician Mei's boy, but unfortunately it was in the year after that That he died, so nothing could be done about it. And now her poor mother has gone down with a consumption ...'

Xi-feng interrupted, sighing and stamping her foot in an exaggerated display of disappointment.

'Oh, what a *shame!* I was just going to offer my services as a match-maker, but it seems that she's already betrothed.'

Who did you have in mind?' Grandmother Jia asked her. 'Never you mind!' said Xi-feng. 'I'm sure they would have made a very good pair; but since she's already got someone else, there doesn't seem any point in discussing it.'

Grandmother Jia knew very well whom Xi-feng had in mind, but hearing that Bao-qin was already spoken for, she dropped the subject and made no further mention of it.

The company talked for a while longer before breaking-up; but of the rest of that day and the night which followed our narrative supplies no account.

*

Next day the snow had cleared. After lunch Grandmother Jia told Xi-chun that, cold or no cold, she must get on with the painting as quickly as possible.

'If you *really* can't get it finished by the end of the year,' she said, 'it doesn't matter. But what you *must* do is get Bao-qin with the maid and the branch of plum-blossom into it. I want you to do that straight away; and they are to be painted exactly *as* they looked when we saw them on that bank yesterday.'

Xi-chun said that she would, though miserably aware that she would find doing so extremely difficult. Later,

when the others went round to her place to see how she was getting on, she was pondering gloomily over this latest problem. Li Wan somewhat heartlessly proposed that they should leave her to her own thoughts and carry on their conversation without her.

'When we got back from Grandmother's last night,' she said, 'Qi and Wen and I were unable to get to sleep, so we lay in bed making up riddles. I made up two using quotations from the *Four Books* and the other two each made up one.'

'Ah yes, that's what we *all* ought to be doing,' said the others. 'Tell us your four first and we'll try to guess the answers.

'Guan-yin lacks a biography,' said Li Wan. 'The answer is a phrase from the *Four Books.'*

'Resting in the highest good,'

Xiang-yun promptly suggested.

'What's that got to do with "biography"?' said Bao-chai.

'Try again,' said Li Wan.

'I know,' said Dai-yu. 'Isn't it

... though good, yet having no memorial?'

'Ah yes, that must be it,' said the others.

'What is the **green** plant that grows in the water?' said Li Wan.

'That just *has* to be

'It is a fast-growing rush,'

said xiang-yun. 'I don't see how that '*could be* wrong.'

'Good for you!' said Li Wan. 'Now here is Wen's riddle:

Beside the rocks the water runs cold.

It's the name of an historical person.'

'That must be "Shan Tao",' said Tan-chun. 'His surname means "mountain"—that's the "rocks"—and "Tao" means "billows"

'Right,' said Li Wan. 'Now Qi's riddle is just a single word:

Firefly

The answer is a single- word, too.'

They all puzzled for a long time over this without being able to think of any answer. It was Bao-qin who finally came up with the solution.

'Yes, I see. It's rather involved. The answer is "flower" isn't it?—I mean the flower that grows.'

Li Qi acknowledged smilingly that this was correct.

'What has "flower" got to do with "firefly"?' the others asked her.

Bao-qin explained:

'In the *Record of Rites* it says

Corrupt grass by transmutation breedeth fireflies.

Now the character for "flower" is written with "grass" at the top and "change"—or, if you like, "transmutation"—underneath. So "corrupt grass by transmutation"—which, according to the *Rites*, produces fireflies—makes the character for "flower

The others laughingly acknowledged that the riddle was an ingenious one.

'All four of these riddles are very good,' said Bao-chai, 'but I don't think they are quite the sort of thing that Lady Jia had in mind. I think we ought to make up some about fairly easy, everyday objects, so that those of us who aren't quite so learned can enjoy them as well.'

Xiang-yun thought for a bit.

'I've got one,' she said presently. 'It's in the form of a "Ruby Lips" stanza:

Far away
From the high fell
Where I used to dwell
Amidst men I play.
But for what gain?
My labour's vain;
My tale is hard to tell.'

No one was able to make out what this could be. After puzzling for a long time, they produced a number of different guesses. Someone thought it was 'a monk'; someone else thought it was 'a Taoist'; a third person suggested that it might be 'a marionette player'.

'You're all wrong,' said Bao-yu, who had been grinning silently to himself while the others guessed, 'I've thought of the answer. It's "a performing monkey".'

'That's it" said Xiang-yun.

'We can understand the first part all right,' said the others; 'but what about the last line? What's that supposed to mean?'

'Have you ever seen a performing monkey that hadn't had its tail docked?' said Xiang-yun.

Groans and laughter.

'Trust Yun's to have a frightful pun in it—as if the riddle wasn't hard enough already!'

'Mrs Xue was telling us yesterday that you've travelled a lot and been to all sorts of interesting places,' Li Wan said to Bao-qin. 'With so much material you ought to be just the person for making up riddles—especially as you're so good at verse-making as well. Why don't *you* make up a few, and the rest of us will try to guess them?'

Bao-qin said nothing, but smiled and nodded, and at once went off into a corner to think.

Bao-chai had now composed a riddle, too, and recited it for them to try and guess while Bao-qin was doing her thinking.

'Tier upon compact tier of fragrant wood:
No craftsman's hand could carve one half so well.
A gale blows all about the temple's eaves,
Yet, though it shakes, no sound comes from my bell.'[7]

[7] See Appendix III, p.588

While the others were still trying to guess the answer to this, Bao-yu recited one that he had just completed himself:

‘’Twixt heaven and earth amidst the clouds so high
Bamboo gives warning to the passer-by.
Eyes strain some feathered traveller to descry
Who’ll bear my answer back into the sky.’

Dai-yu also had one ready, and proceeded to recite it to them:

‘See my little prancing steed!
Of silken rein he has no need,
Round the city wall he goes,
Wreaking havoc on his foes.
At his master’s touch he moves
With thunder of advancing hooves.
In isles by tortoises supported
His deeds are honourably reported.’

Tan-chun, too had composed a riddle, but as she was on the point of reciting it, Bao-qin came back from her corner to announce that she had finished.

‘I’ve been visiting places of historical interest ever since I was little,’ she said, ‘so I really have seen quite a lot. What I’ve done now is to choose ten of them, mostly associated with some famous person or other, and make up a poem about each one. The verses themselves may sound rather like doggerel, but the point about them is that, as well as commemorating these famous places and people, each of them contains hidden references to some common object which you have to guess.’

‘Ah, that sounds *very* ingenious!’ they said. ‘But why not write them down, so that we can take our time thinking about them?’

What happened next will be related in the following chapter.

CHAPTER 51

A clever cousin composes some ingenious riddles
And an unskillful physician prescribes a barbarous remedy

WHEN Bao-qin explained that the riddles she had composed were in the form of quatrains, each containing a clue to some well-known object, about famous places she had visited in the course of her travels, the cousins were greatly impressed, and waited with eagerness for her to copy them out. This is what they read when she had finished doing so[8]:

Red Cliff

The river at **Red** Cliff was choked with the dead,

[8] See Appendix III, p.588

And the ships without crew carried naught but their names.
A clamour and shouting, a wind took the blaze,
And a host of brave souls rode aloft in the flames.

*

Hanoi

His column of brass bade the nations obey:
The noise of him spread through barbarian parts.
Brave Ma Yuan to conquest and empire was born:
He needed no Iron Flute to teach him those arts.

*

Mt Zhong-shan

Though ambition had never been part of your nature
And the call from retirement was none of your choosing,
You danced in the end at another's commandment,
So you can't be surprised if we find it amusing.

*

Huai-yin

The brave must beware of the vicious dog's bite:
The gift of a throne on your fate set the seal.
Let us learn from your story the humble to prize,
And due gratitude show for the gift of a meal.

*

Guang-ling

Your crows and cicadas no more you shall hear
By the old Sui embankment back home in the South;
But the scandalous story of those wanton times
Wags in many *an* idle, unsavoury mouth.

*

Peach Leaf Ford

In the waters a scene of decay is reflected;
Long since from its bough did the last peach-leaf fall.
Your old Southern mansion has tumbled in ruins,
And only your likeness looks down from the wall.

*

***Green** Mound*

The Amur's black flood for pure grief is arrested;
The frozen string twangs with a heartbroken sound;

And, deploring the harsh rule that ordered this exile,
A few crooked trees bow in shame to the ground.

*

Ma-wei

The sad, ravaged face seemed to shine in its sweat;
Then soon that sweet softness all vanished away.
Yet something remained, for the well-known perfume
In the clothing she wore lingers on to this day.

*

The Monastery at Pu-dong

Young Reddie was ever a light, empty creature,
Always to-ing and fro-ing in all kinds of weather.
Though her Mistress in ire hung her up from the ceiling,
Those two had already been walking together.

*

The Plum-tree Shrine

‘’Twill be by the willow and not by the plum.’
But who is it there will her likeness discover?
Let not her full moon make you think that Spring’s coming,
For the cold parts her now till next year from her lover.

After reading these poems, the cousins all praised the remarkable ingenuity with which they had been constructed. Only Bao-chai was critical

‘The first eight of these poems have historically verifiable subjects, but what about the last two? I’m afraid I don’t quite understand what they are about. I think you ought to make up another two to replace them with.’

‘Don’t be so stuffy, Chai!’ said Dai-yu. ‘Talk about “gluing the bridges of the zither”! It’s true that the subjects of those last two poems can’t be found in the history books, but how can you say that you don’t know what they are? Even if, as well-bred young ladies, we may not read the books in which they *are* to be found, we’ve all watched plenty of plays. Every three-year-old child is familiar with these stories. It’s sheer hypocrisy to pretend that you’ve never heard of them.’

‘Hear, hear!’ said Tan-chun.

‘In any case,’ said Li Wan, ‘she *has* actually been to the places associated with the stories, even if the stories themselves are unhistorical. Stories pick up all kinds of circumstantial detail in the course of centuries of re-telling. Sooner or later some know-all invariably equips them with a location in order to fool more people into believing them. I remember on my journey here when I first came up to the capital we visited three or four different sites all claiming to be the burial-place of Guan Yu. Now no one doubts that Guan Yu actually existed or that he actually did the heroic things he is supposed to have done; but he can’t have been buried in more than one grave. Obviously the tradition that he was buried in those places was invented by people—living long after Guan Yu’s death who loved and admired Guan Yu and all that he had stood for and wanted to claim him for

themselves. And if you look in. the *Geographical Gazetteer*, you'll find that it isn't only Guan Yu who has graves in several different places: practically all the famous men who ever lived appear to have been buried in more than one place. And when it comes to sites which are famous because of people who never even existed, they are still more numerous. It may well be that the people those last two poems are about didn't exist; but though the stories about them are unhistorical, they are certainly well-known. You can hear them told -by story-tellers; you can see them acted on the stage; you can even find references to them on the divination-sticks that people tell their fortunes with in temples. There can't be a man, woman or child who isn't familiar with them. And even if one knows them from the *books*, it can hardly be said that to have read a few lyrics from *The Western Chamber* or *The Soul's Return* is tantamount to reading pornography. No, I see no harm in these two poems. I think she should leave them as they are.'

This, coming from Li Wan, effectively silenced Bao-chai's objection.

Some time was now spent in trying to guess answers to the riddles concealed in these poems, but all of their guesses were wrong.

The days in winter are very short and in no time at all, it seemed, they were trooping back into the mansion for their dinner. While they were there, a message arrived for Lady Wang to say that Aroma's brother, Hua Zi-fang, had come and was waiting outside in the front.

His mother is seriously ill and has been asking to see Aroma,' said the messenger. He asks if, as a special kindness, you will allow her to go home and see her.'

'We shouldn't dream of preventing a mother from seeing her daughter under such circumstances,' said Lady Wang. 'Of course she may go.'

She called for Xi-feng and, having explained the situation to her, left it to her to decide what arrangements should be made for Aroma's departure. Xi-feng promised to attend to the matter and hurried back to her own apartment to do so. She told Zhou Rui's wife to break the news to Aroma about her mother. She also gave detailed instructions for the visit.

'Get hold of another of the women- in your group to go with you as second chaperone. And take two of the junior maids with you as well. And you'll want four of the grooms from the front. Take responsible ones: not too young. Tell them you'll need two carriages, one large and one small. You two can sit in the larger one with Aroma, and the two maids can go in the smaller one.'

Zhou Rui's wife was on the point of going off to execute these orders, but Xi-feng had evidently not finished.

'Aroma's a girl. who doesn't like fuss. You'd better tell her that it's my wish that she should dress herself up in the very best things she's got. Tell her to take a good big bundle of extra clothes with her as well. The cloth it's wrapped in is to be of the highest quality. Her hand-warmer is to be a good one, too. And tell her that before she goes I want her to come here so that I can have a look at her.'

Zhou Rui's wife went off to do her bidding. In due course Aroma herself arrived, dressed up in all her finery. She was accompanied by Zhou Rui's wife and the other woman and by two little maids, one carrying her bundle and the other one her hand-warmer. Xi-feng proceeded at once to inspect her, beginning at the top. Aroma's hair, liberally studded with pearled and golden jewellery, was satisfactory; her clothing, it seemed, less so. She had on an ermine-lined silk tapestry dress of peach-**pink** satin, sprigged with a pattern of different sorts of flowers, a leek-**green** padded skirt embroidered in couched gold thread and coloured silks, and a black satin jacket lined with squirrel.

'I see. These are all things that Her Ladyship gave you. That's good. But the jacket is too plain. And it's not warm enough for the time of year, either. You want something with a heavier fur in it.'

‘This is the only one she gave me,’ said Aroma, ‘and the only other one I’ve got is lined with ermine. She promised me one with a heavier fur in time for the New Year, but I haven’t been given it yet.’

‘I’ve got one with a heavier fur which I haven’t worn because the trimmings don’t suit me,’ said Xi-feng. ‘I’d been meaning to get it altered, but I could let you have it now if you like and you can give it back to me to have altered when Her Ladyship gets this other one made that she’s promised you. We’ll call it a loan.’

The servants laughed.

‘You like to have your little joke, Mrs Lian. All the year round you’re handing things out on the quiet that Her Ladyship has overlooked, yet you never ask her for any thing back for them. Why so stingy all of a sudden about a little old jacket?’

‘Her Ladyship can’t be expected to remember *everything,’* said Xi-feng, ‘and these are, after all, rather trifling matters. Of course, *someone* has to think about them, for the sake of appearances. Even if it leaves me a bit out of pocket, I’ve got to see that everyone is dressed decently. If that gets me a reputation for being generous well, that’s just one of the hardships I must learn to put up with! It would be much worse to have everyone going around looking like tramps. Think of the jokes I should hear about my housekeeping *then!’*

‘There can’t be many like you, Mrs Lian,’ said the women admiringly, ‘so considerate towards Her Ladyship and yet at the same time so thoughtful towards us servants. You really do think of everything.’

While they were praising her, Xi-feng was already ordering Patience to fetch the jacket she had mentioned. It had in fact arrived from the tailor’s only a day or two previously. It was a very grand one, in slate-**blue** satin, with eight large, embroidery-like silk tapestry roundels woven into it, and with a lining of arctic fox. After giving Aroma the jacket, Xi-feng inspected her bundle. The carrying-cloth was of silk gauze in a nondescript black-and-white pattern, lined with strawberrycoloured silk. All she had got wrapped up in it were a couple of padded dresses, by no means new, and her other fur-lined jacket. Xi-feng told Patience to fetch a better carrying-cloth-one made of a good-quality foreign broadcloth and lined with turquoise-coloured silk—and a snow-cape to add to the contents of her bundle. Patience went off to get them. When she came back she was carrying not one snow-cape but two: one of them, in dark-red felt, showed signs of wear; the other, in dark-red camlet, seemed to be almost new.

Aroma protested.

‘I can’t possibly take both of these,’ she said. ‘Even one of these would seem a bit on the grand side for me.’

‘Just pack the felt one,’ said Patience. ‘You can carry the other one on your arm and on your way out get someone to take it over to Miss Xing. Yesterday when we had that heavy snow there were ten or a dozen of them all wearing felt or camlet snow-capes. They made quite a picture in their **red** capes against the background of white snow. She was the only one there who hadn’t got one. She looked all hunched-up with the cold, poor thing: I felt really sorry for her. Let *her* have the camlet one.’

‘See how liberal she is with my possessions,’ Xi-feng expostulated jokingly. ‘Heavens, girl, I give enough away already without needing you to help me!’

‘Like mistress, like maid,’ said the woman who had spoken before. ‘It’s because you yourself are so considerate towards Her Ladyship and so kind to us servants that she feels free to behave in that way. If you were a mean. tight-fisted sort of person, she’d never dare.’

Xi-feng laughed.

‘I suppose you could say that she understands me a bit—about thirty per cent perhaps!’

She turned back to Aroma to deliver her parting instructions.

‘We must hope that your mother recovers, but if by any chance she *doesn’t*, you will obviously have .to stay on for a bit. Let me know, in that case, and I’ll have your bedding sent on to you. Don’t use their bedding or any of their toilet things.’ She turned to Zhou Rui’s wife. ‘You know our rules, don’t you? I don’t need to go over them again.’

‘Yes, ma’am,’ said Zhou Rui’s wife. ‘All their people are to keep away from us while we are there, and if we stay they have to give us one or two inside rooms to ourselves.’

With that she accompanied Aroma outside and called to the pages to fetch lanterns, for it was already getting dark. The little party then made its way to the carriages, and having disposed themselves inside them, were driven off to Hua Zi-fang’s house, where our story leaves them.

*

Back at the mansion Xi-feng summoned two of the nannies from **Green** Delights.

‘I doubt very much whether Aroma will be coming back for a day or two,’ she told them. ‘You’d better tell whichever two of the senior maids you think are most reliable to be on call at night in Bao-yu’s room while she is away. And keep an eye on things yourselves. See that he doesn’t get up to mischief.’

The two women went off, saying that they would attend to the matter, and a little later came back to report on what they had arranged.

‘We’ve put Skybright and Musk on night-call in his room. There are always four of us outside, of course. We take it in turns to be on duty throughout the night.’ Xi-feng nodded.

‘See that he goes to bed early and doesn’t get up too late.’

The old women promised, and went back into the Garden.

Not long after this Zhou Rui’s wife returned with the message that Xi-feng had been half expecting: Aroma’s mother had already breathed her last and Aroma would be unable to come back. Xi-feng went off to report this news to Lady Wang. She also sent someone into the Garden to collect Aroma’s bedding and toilet things. Bao-yu stood by and supervised, while Skybright and Musk got them ready.

When Aroma’s things bad been despatched, the two girls removed their hair ornaments and changed into their night-clothes. Skybright showed no disposition, after changing, to remove herself from the clothes-warmer over which she was crouched.

‘Now don’t start acting the young lady,’ said Musk. ‘I advise you to stir yourself a bit.’

‘I’ll stir myself soon enough when you are out of the way,’ said Skybright. ‘As long as you are around, I might as well take it easy.’

‘Now come on, there’s a good girl!’ said busy Musk. ‘*I’ll* make his bed and *you* can put the covet over the dressing-mirror and fasten the catch. You’re taller than I am.’

She bustled off and began making up Bao-yu’s bed.

‘Hail’ said Skybright disgustedly. ‘Just as I was beginning to get warm!’

Bao-yu, who up to that moment had been sitting apart, abstractedly wondering about Aroma’s mother (he had still not been told of her death), chanced suddenly to catch this remark. At once he got up, went into the next room, and attended to the dressing-mirror himself,

‘Carry on warming yourself,’ he said with a smile to Skybright as he came in again, ‘I’ve done it for you.’

‘I don’t think I shall *ever* get warm,’ said Skybright. And I’ve just remembered: I haven’t brought in the

hot-water bottle.'

'How thoughtful we are all of a sudden!' said Musk. 'He never has a hot-water bottle. And *we* shan't need one tonight. It'll be much -warmer in here on the clothes-warmer than it is on the kang in the other room.'

'You're not *both* going to sleep on the clothes-warmer, are you?' said Bao-yu. 'I shall be scared, all on my own in the closet-bed with nobody near me. I shan't be able to sleep.'

'Well, *I'm* sleeping on the clothes-warmer at all events,' said Skybright. 'Let Musk sleep beside the closet-bed.'

The time was well after nine. Musk, who had by this time let down the curtains, moved the lamp to its night-time position, and lit the slow-burning incense, now helped Bao-yu into bed and tucked him up. After that she and Skybright themselves settled down for the night, Skybright on top of the clothes-warmer and Musk outside the .curtains which separated the alcove of the closet-bed from the rest of the room.

Some time in the middle watch of the night Bao-yu called out for Aroma a couple of times in his sleep and, not getting the customary response, woke up. Awake he remembered, with some amusement, that Aroma was not there to answer. The noise he made had woken Skybright, who called out from where she lay to Musk.

'Musk! He's even woken me up, over here. Do you mean to say you really haven't heard anything, lying there right beside him? You must sleep like a corpse!

Musk turned over and yawned.

'He was calling for Aroma; what's it got to do with me? What do you want?.' she asked Bao-yu.

'I want some tea,' he said.

Musk hopped out of bed to get him some. She was wearing only a quilted **red** silk tunic.

'You'll get cold,' said Bao-yu. 'Put my fur gown on.' She picked up the winter dressing-gown that lay always ready beside him, in case he should need to get up during the night. It was lined with the **orange-yellow** chest fur of pine-martens and had a big fur collar. Slipping the gown over her shoulders, Musk first washed her hands in the basin, then she poured him a cup of hot water and held the spittoon for him to spit into when he had washed his mouth out. After that she took a teacup from the shelf where the tea-things were kept, rinsed it out with hot water, and filled it from a pot in a padded wicker case in which ready-brewed tea was kept warm for such emergencies. Having ministered to Bao-yu's wants, she rinsed her own mouth out with the hot water and poured half a cup of tea out for herself.

'Musk,' Skybright called out to her, 'give us a drop too, there's a dear!'

'What a nerve!'

'Go on!' said Skybright. 'Tomorrow night you can lie back all night long and let me wait on you.'

Musk held out the spittoon, as she had done for Bao-yu, while Skybright rinsed her mouth out, then fetched her half a cupful of tea.

'Don't go to sleep yet, you two,' she said, as soon as Skybright had been attended to. 'Keep talking while I go outside for a *hit.*'

'There's a ghost waiting for you out there,' said Skybright. 'There's no ghost out there, but there's a very fine moon,' said Bao-yu. 'Go ahead: we'll keep talking, don't worry!'

He coughed significantly.

Musk opened the door and lifted up the felt portière. There was, as Bao-yu had predicted, a beautiful moon outside. As soon as she had gone out, Skybright slipped down from the clothes-warmer and tip-toed after her, intending to give her a scare. Physically the hardiest of the maids and, as a rule, the one who was least afraid of the cold, she went as she was, with nothing but a short tunic to cover her. Bao-yu tried to dissuade her from going out.

'I wouldn't, if I were you. If you catch cold, it won't be quite so funny.'

But Skybright motioned impatiently to him to be quiet and crept out of the door.

The .moonlight outside was like water. Suddenly she heard the wind. It was only a brief, faint gust, but the chill of it penetrated to the marrow of her bones and made her shudder.

'It's certainly true what they say about a warm body fearing the wind,' she reflected. 'This cold is really no joke.'

She was still determined to frighten Musk; but just as she was about to do so, Bao-yu called out in a loud voice from indoors.

'Careful Musk! Skybright's outside.'

Immediately Skybright ran in again.

What an old woman you are!' she said. 'The shock wouldn't have killed her.'

'I wasn't thinking about that,' said Bao-yu. 'I was worried about your catching cold; and besides, if she'd called out when you startled her she might have woken somebody up, and you know what it would have been like then. They'd never have believed it was a practical joke, they'd have said, "Just look, Aroma only away for a single night. and already the girls in his room are seeing things. Not one of them's to be trusted." Come on, come over here and tuck this quilt in for me.'

Skybright went over to arrange his bedding. While she was doing so, she stuck one of her hands inside the cover and held it against his skin.

'Your hand *is freezing!'* he said. 'I told you you'd get cold.' He noticed how **red** her cheeks were and put out his hand to touch them. They were as cold as ice.

'Quick, you'd better get inside here and warm up,' he said. Just as she did so, there was a loud bang and Musk rushed giggling into the room, slamming the door behind her.

'Whew, what a shock I' she said. 'I thought I saw someone crouching down in the shadows behind the rockery. Actually it was that long-tailed pheasant. I was just going to cry out, when it heard me coming and flew up into the light, so that I could see what it was. If I'd lost my head and started screaming, I might have woken everybody up.'

She said this while washing her hands. Presently she finished washing and laughed.

'Did you say Skybright had gone outside? I wonder why I didn't see her. I bet she went outside to scare me.'

'What's this lump here then?' said Bao-yu. 'She's down in here getting warm. She *did* go outside. If I hadn't called out when I did, she would have scared you.'

'She doesn't need *me* to scare her, silly little goose!' said Skybright, laughing, from inside the bedclothes. 'By the looks of it she's perfectly capable of scaring herself!'

She emerged from Bao-yu's bedding now and crossed the room to the clothes-warmer to get inside her own. Musk gazed at her incredulously as she did so.

'Is that all you were wearing when you went outside, that circus rider's outfit you've got on now ?'

'That's all she was wearing,' said Bao-yu.

'You'll die before your time!' said Musk. 'What, standing around with only that on? It's enough to freeze the skin off you!'

She took the copper cover off the brazier and damped down the glowing charcoal by shovelling some ash on to it with the fire shovel. Before replacing the cover, she threw on a couple of pieces of agalloch to sweeten the air. Then she went behind the screen and trimmed the lamp up. After that she too went back to bed.

The effect on Skybright of the sudden change of temperature was to make her sneeze. Bao-yu groaned.

'I told you so. You *have* caught a cold.'

'She was complaining that she -didn't feel too good when we got up this morning,' said Musk, 'and she hasn't eaten properly all day. Yet instead of looking after herself she has to go playing pranks on people outside. It will be her own silly fault if she *is* ill tomorrow.'

'Does your head feel hot?' Bao-yu asked Skybright.

Skybright coughed a few times.

'It's nothing,' she said, 'I'm not that delicate!'

Just then the chiming clock that hung on the partition in the outer room struck twice and they heard the old woman on night duty cough a couple of times and call out:

'Go to sleep, young ladies! There'll be plenty of time for talking in the morning.'

Bao-yu gave a subdued chuckle.

'Better not talk any more,' he said. 'We don't want them talking about *us.*'

After that the three of them settled down and went to sleep again.

When Skybright got up next morning, her nose was stuffed up' her voice was hoarse, and the slightest movement cost her an effort.

'We'd better keep this dark,' said Bao-yu. 'If my mother gets to hear of it, she's sure to insist on your going back home until you're better; and however nice it may be at your home, I'm sure it won't be so warm as here, so you'll be better off with us. I'll get a doctor in through the back gate to have a look at you on the quiet.'

'That's *all* very well,' said Skybright, 'but at least let Mrs Zhu know what you're doing. Otherwise, when the doctor comes, what are you going to say if they start asking questions?'

Bao-yu knew that she was right and instructed one of the old nannies to go to Li Wan with a message.

'Tell Mrs Zhu that Skybright has got a bit of a chill. Say it's nothing very serious, and with Aroma away we shall be even more short-handed if she goes back home to get better, so we'd like to get a doctor in quietly through the back gate to have a look at her and not tell Her Ladyship about it.'

The old nannie was gone for quite a long time. When she did return it was with the following answer.

'Mrs Zhu says all right, as long as she's better after one or two doses of medicine, otherwise she thinks it would really be better to send her home. She says there's so much danger of infection at this time of year. She's particularly worried that one of the young ladies might catch something.'

All this time Skybright had been lying in the closet-bed inside, coughing. She stopped coughing when she heard this message and called out angrily.

'Anyone would think I'd got the plague I suppose I'd better go, if she's so scared that I might infect somebody. It would be just too terrible if any of you lot were to get a headache or a sore throat as long as you live!'

She actually began getting up as she said this, but Bao-yu rushed in and made her lie down again.

'Now don't start getting angry. She is, after ail, responsible for the girls and she's probably terrified that Lady Wang might get to know about this and grumble at her. I'm sure that's the only reason she says this: to cover herself in case it's found Out. You're inclined to be quick-tempered at the best of times. Now, with so much extra heat inside you, you are even more inflammable!'

At this point the doctor was announced and Bao-yu barely had time to conceal himself behind a bookcase as he entered the outer doorway, conducted by two or three old women from the gate. The maids had all fled as soon as the arrival of a male visitor was announced, leaving only three or four old nannies in charge of the apartment. The old nannies quickly let down the closet-bed's **red** embroidered curtains and Skybright stretched forth her hand through a join in them.

This hand held out for the doctor's inspection had nails two or three inches long on two of its fingers, stained with balsam juice to a delicate shade of **pink**. The doctor averted his eyes from this inflaming sight and would not proceed with the examination until one of the old nannies had covered it up with a handkerchief. When he had finished feeling the pulses, he got up, went into the outer room, and announced his diagnosis to the nannies.

'The young lady is suffering from inner congestion caused by exposure. In view of the severe weather we have been having we should probably not be far wrong in calling it a minor case of cold-fever or *grippe*. Fortunately your patient is a young lady and therefore probably fairly modest in her diet; and the exposure does not appear to have been a very serious one. What we have, then, is no more than a mild infection picked up ty someone whose stamina is normally rather low. One or two doses of something to disperse the congestion should be sufficient to put her right.'

Having pronounced this diagnosis, he went off, conducted once more by the women who had brought him in.

Li Wan had sent warning of the doctor's arrival both to the servants on the gate and the maids in the various apartments, so that his passage through the Garden, both coming and going, was through an empty landscape in which not a single female was to be seen. After passing through the Garden gate, he sat down in the outer lodge which the pages occupied and wrote -out his prescription.

'Don't go yet, sir,' said one of the old women when he had finished writing it. 'Our young master always likes to have his say about these matters. Like as not he'll have some question to ask you.'

The doctor looked startled.

'Did you say "master"? But surely that was a young lady I examined just now? The room was certainly a young lady's boudoir, and the consultation was made with the patient behind a curtain. Surely it cannot have been a young gentleman?'

The old woman laughed.

'I see now why the boys said we had a "new doctor" coming in today. You certainly don't know much about this family, sir! That *was* our young master's room you were in

> lust now, but the person you examined was one of his maids one of the senior ones. That was no young lady's room. If one of the young mistresses had been ill, you wouldn't have got into *her* room that easy not on your first visit!'

She took the prescription from him and went back inside to show Bao-yu. Bao-yu glanced through it rapidly. 'Perilla', 'kikio root', 'wind-shield' and 'nepeta-seed' appeared among the drugs at the head of the list, and lower down he noticed 'thorny lime' and 'ephedra'. He was appalled.

'He's prescribing for her as if she were a man. However bad the congestion is, you can't expect a young girl to stand up to drugs like thorny lime and ephedra. Who sent for this man, anyway? You'd better get rid of him straight away and send for someone we know.'

'We weren't to know what his prescriptions would be like,' said the woman defensively. 'I suppose we could send one of the boys for Dr Wang. The only thing is, as we didn't tell the Office about this one, we shall have to pay him ourselves.'

'How much ?' said Bao-yu.

‘Well, you don’t want to give too little,’ said the old woman. ‘I should think for a single visit a family like ours would give a tael.’

‘How much do we give Dr Wang for-a visit?’ said Bao-yu.

‘Ah, Dr Wang and Dr Zhang are our regular doctors. They aren’t paid by the visit. They get a fixed yearly amount paid to them in quarterly installments. But this is a new man who’s only ever been here the once, so we have to pay him now.’

Bao-yu ordered Musk to fetch a tael for him, but Musk said that she didn’t know where Aroma kept her money.

‘I’ve seen her taking silver from the little pearl-inlaid cabinet,’ said Bao-yu. ‘I’ll go along with you and have a look.’

The two of them went into the room that Aroma used as her store-room and opened the cabinet that Bao-yu had referred to. In the top compartment they found nothing but writing-brushes, ink-sticks, fans, incense-pastilles and a wide variety of scarves and sachets. In the lower compartment, however, they found several strings of cash, and there was a drawer in it in which they found a work-basket containing several pieces of silver and even a little balance for weighing it with. Musk picked up the balance.

‘Which of these is the one tad mark?’ she said.

‘That’s rich,’ said Bao-yu, ‘*your* asking me! Anyone would think you were new here.’

Musk laughed. She was about to go outside and ask, but Bao-yu stopped her.

‘Just pick out one of the larger pieces and give her that. There’s no need to bother about the exact amount. We aren’t shopkeepers.’

Putting the balance back into the basket, Musk picked up one of the pieces of silver and felt the weight of it on her palm.

‘I should think this one is about a tael,’ she said. ‘Anyway, it’s better to give too much than too little. A poor creature like that, used to scrimping and scraping himself, would say that it was meanness if we gave him too little. He’d never believe it was because we didn’t know how to use-a balance.’

The woman who had brought the prescription was standing in the doorway, following all this with amusement.

‘That piece you’ve got in your hand is half of a five-tael ingot,’ she said. ‘It must weigh two taels at the very least. .Since you haven’t got any silver-shears, I should keep that piece if I were you and pick out a smaller one.’

But Musk had already closed the cabinet.

‘Oh, I can’t be bothered to look in there again. Just take it. Never mind the weight.’

‘And tell Tealeaf to go and get Dr Wang,’ said Bao-yu.

The old woman took the silver and went off to deal with the matter.

Tealeaf must have been quick, for Dr Wang arrived quite soon afterwards. The diagnosis he gave after taking Skybright’s pulses was similar to the other man’s, but there was no ephedra or thorny lime in his prescription: their place was taken by milder drugs such as angelica, bitter-peel and white peony root; and the quantities prescribed were smaller. Bao-yu was pleased.

‘That’s more like it!’ he said. ‘She certainly needs treating for congestion, but not in the savage way this other man was proposing. I remember last year when I was suffering from the same thing and Dr Wang came to look at me—in my case I was badly constipated as well—he said that my constitution wouldn’t stand- up to harsh decongestants like ephedra, gypsum and thorny lime. Well, if *my* constitution won’t stand up to those drugs, I’m quite sure that yours or Skybright’s wouldn’t. In comparison with you girls, I’m like one of those old aspens that have stood for half a century or more in some grave-garth in the countryside, while you are like those delicate crab-flowers that Yun brought round for me in the autumn.’

‘Aspens aren’t the only trees you find growing in gravegarths,’ said Musk, smiling. ‘What about pines and cypresses.? I hate aspens great, stupid trees I It’s not as if they had more leaves than others, yet at the slightest breath of wind they start .making a racket. Why compare yourself to an aspen? How common!’

‘I wouldn’t compare myself with a pine or a cypress,’ said Bao-yu. ‘Confucius himself speaks highly of those two trees:

> “When the year is coldest, we see that pine and cypress are the last to fade.”
>
> That shows you how noble they are. I should need to be a very conceited person to compare myself with *them.’*

While he was still discussing this with Musk and Skybright, the old woman who had shown him the prescription arrived back again with the drugs. Bao-yu told one of the maids to find the silver medicine skillet and brew them on the brazier in his room.

‘Now do be sensible!’ said Skybright. Tell them to do it in the tea-kitchen. You’ll stink the place out with the smell of boiling herbs if you do it in here.’

‘But the smell of boiling herbs is the finest smell in the world,’ said Bao-yu, ‘—far superior to the perfume of any flower. Even the Immortals are supposed to gather herbs and cook them; and gathering herbs to make medicine with is the favourite occupation of hermits and holy men. The smell of medicine: that is the one aesthetic treat that has so far been missing from this apartment; and now, today, we shall enjoy it!’

And he insisted that they should prepare the medicine on the spot. Then he told Musk to get some things ready to send to Aroma and commissioned one of the old women to take them to her. She was to see how Aroma was and urge her not to endanger her health by excessive weeping. When all these matters had been attended to, he went off to pay his morning calls on Lady Wang and Grandmother Jia and to have his lunch.

He found Xi-feng at Grandmother Jia’s place discussing mealtime arrangements with his mother and grandmother.

‘Now that it’s so cold and the days are so short,’ she was saying, ‘wouldn’t it be better if Li Wan and the young people were to have their meals in the Garden, to avoid all this trekking to and fro? They can begin coming in for them again when the weather is warmer and the days are not so short.’

‘Oh, much better, surely?’ said-Lady Wang. ‘Especially when it’s snowing or blowing, as it has been recently. It’s so bad for one to be exposed to the cold immediately after eating. It’s also not good to eat food after being out in the cold with an empty stomach. The empty parts fill up with cold air and then the food presses it down inside one. That big five-frame room inside the back gate of the Garden would make an ideal kitchen. We’ve already got all those women there who keep watch in the Garden at night, so there are plenty of hands for fetching and carrying. All we need are a couple of women from the kitchens here to go over and do the cooking. There are regular allowances for vegetables and so forth, so they can either get the money from Accounts and do their own shopping themselves, or, if they prefer, they can ask the Office to get the stuff for them. And when we have anything special here, like pheasant or roebuck, we can always arrange for a share of it to be sent over to them.’

‘I’d been thinking along these lines myself,’ said Grandmother Jia, ‘but I was afraid that opening another kitchen might mean extra trouble for you and Feng.’

‘No trouble at all,’ said Xi-feng. ‘It’s simply a matter of switching allowances—spending a bit more here and a bit more there. And even if it does put our expenses up a bit, we don’t want the girls getting colds. Cousin Lin is particularly susceptible. Even Bao-yu is liable to suffer from the cold; and none of our girls is really strong.’

How Grandmother Jia replied will be shown in the following chapter.

CHAPTER 52

Kind Patience conceals the theft of a Shrimp Whisker bracelet
And brave Skybright repairs the hole in a
Peacock Gold snowcape

'QUITE so,' said Grandmother Jia in answer to Xi-feng's advocacy of the separate kitchen. 'I would have mentioned it myself, but you have so many burdens already and I didn't want to add to them. I know, of course, that you wouldn't have complained, but you might easily have got the impression that I only care about the younger ones and have no consideration for you busy people who are responsible for run-ring the household. However, now that you have suggested it yourself, I am naturally delighted.'

It chanced that besides Aunt Xue and Mrs Li, Lady Xing and You-shi were also present on this occasion, having come over some time previously to make their morning calls and not yet gone back again. Grandmother Jia availed herself of their presence to sing Xi-feng's praises.

'I wouldn't say this as a rule because I don't want to make her conceited, and in any case the younger ones might not agree with me: but tell me now—as older married women you have all had a good deal to do with her - have you ever met anyone quite as thoughtful as Feng?'

Aunt Xue, Mrs Li and You-shi agreed that people with Xi-feng's virtues were indeed extremely rare.

'Other young married women put on a show of liking their husband's relations for form's sake,' they observed, 'but she really does seem to care for the young people; and she is plainly devoted to you.'

Grandmother Jia nodded and sighed.

'I'm very fond of *her,* but I'm afraid she's a bit too sharp. It doesn't do to be too sharp.'

Xi-feng laughed.

'Now there you are quite wrong, Grannie. The saying is that sharp-witted people don't live long. Everyone says that and everyone believes it, but you should be the last person to agree with them. Look how long-lived and lucky you are, and yet you are ten times more sharp-witted than me. By rights I should live twice as long as you, if there is any truth in the saying. I expect to live until I am at least a thousand. At all events I shan't die until I have seen you go to heaven!'

'It will be a very dull sort of world when all the rest are dead and only we two old harpies are left alive,' said Grandmother Jia.

The others laughed.

Remembering Skybright, Bao-yu left before the others and hurried back to his apartment to see how she was. The air in it reeked of medicine. Skybright, lying on the kang, her face a dusky **red** now with the fever, appeared to be completely on her own. He felt her forehead and found it burning to the touch. Quickly warming his hands over the stove, he slipped one of them inside the bedclothes and felt her body. That too was fiery hot.

'I should have thought Musk and Ripple might have stayed with you, if no one else,' he said disgustedly. 'I call that pretty heartless, leaving you on your own like this.'

'Ripple's not here because I made her go and have her lunch,' said Skybright 'And Musk has only just this moment been called outside by Patience. They're whispering together in the front about something or other

probably about the fact that I didn't go home to get better.'

'Patience isn't that sort of person,' said Bao-yu. 'She wouldn't have known that you were ill in any case, so she wouldn't have come specially about *you*. Probably she came to talk to Musk about something else, but happening to find you ill, pretended she had come about you out of politeness. It's the sort of social fib that anyone might tell under the circumstances. Even if you *were* in trouble for not going home, it's got nothing to do with Patience; and *as* you have always been on good terms with her in the past, there's no earthly reason why she should want to make unpleasantness between you now by interfering in something that doesn't concern her.'

'I expect you're right,' said Skybright. 'But I don't under-stand why she should want to hide things from me.'

'I'll go and find out what they're talking about,' said Bao-yu. 'If I go out the back door and round the side, I shall be able to listen to them from outside the window.'

Going round to the front as he had said, he inclined his ear to the window and listened. He could hear Musk talking in a low voice to Patience inside:

'How did you come to get it back again?'

'It was when I was washing my hands in the Garden that day that I lost it,' he heard Patience reply. 'Mrs Lian made me keep quiet about it at the time, but as soon as we got back she sent word round to the nannies in the different apartments and told them to investigate. To tell the truth, we rather suspected Miss Xing's maid. We thought being so poor and not used to seeing things like that lying around she might have been tempted. We never dreamed that it would turn out to be one of *your* people.

'It was Trinket who stole it. She was seen by your Mamma Song. Fortunately, when Mamma Song came round with the bracelet to tell Mrs Lian, Mrs Lian was out, so I quickly took it from her and told her to keep quiet about it.

'I couldn't help thinking how considerate is to you girls and how proud of you all he is. It's only two years since that girl Honesty stole the jade and there are some I could mention who are still gloating about it, and now here's this girl stealing gold—not from him this time but from one of his neighbours, which is worse. I could just imagine the gloating there would be if *that* got around. It seemed so unjust that he, of all people, should be let down by his own girls in this way.

'Anyway, I told Mamma Song that she was under no circumstances to let Bao-yu know about this. "In fact," I said, "you'd better not tell anyone. Just behave as if nothing had happened." Of course, it wasn't only Bao-yu I was thinking about. I knew that Their Ladyships would be very angry if the got to hear of it and then it would be very unpleasant for Aroma and the rest of you.

'The story I told Mrs Lian when she got back was that I'd been to see Mrs Zhu and picked the bracelet up on the way. I told her it must have slipped off into the grass that day while I was washing and got buried under the snow, which explains why nobody could find it. When the snow melted, there it was, shining in the sun for all to see. I think she believed me.

'The reason I'm telling *you* this is so that you should be on your guard about that girl. Keep an eye on her and don't send her on any errands. When Aroma gets back, have a word with *her* about it and see if you can't cook up some excuse for dismissing her.'

'Little wretch I' said Musk. 'It isn't as if she hasn't seen things like that before. How could she be so stupid?'

'It wasn't a particularly valuable bracelet,' said Patience. 'It's one that Mrs Lian gave me. It's what they call a "shrimp whisker" bracelet. I think the pearl on it might be quite valuable. That Skybright of yours is such a fire-brand that if I told *her* this, I'm sure she'd never be able to keep quiet about it. She'd blow up immediately and start hitting the girl or shouting at her, and then the whole thing would be out, in spite of all I had done to

keep it dark. That's why I'm telling *you.* I thought *someone* ought to be warned, so that you can keep an eye on her.'

With these words Patience took her leave.

Bao-yu had listened to what she said with conflicting emotions: pleasure at discovering that Patience understood him so well; anger that Trinket should be a thief; regret that so intelligent a person should be capable of so ugly an action. Going back to Skybright, he relayed to her everything he had just heard except what Patience had said about Skybright herself, which he emended somewhat for her benefit.

'She said you're such a worrier that if you were to hear this now, while you are ill, it would make you worse. She's planning to tell you about it when you are better.'

Skybright's reaction was as fiery as Patience had foreseen it would be. Her eyebrows flew up and her eyes became round with anger. She wanted to summon Trinket immediately.

'Isn't it rather a poor return for Patience's considerateness immediately to start making an outcry about it?' said Bao-yu, restraining her. 'Why not accept what she has done in the spirit in which it was intended and get rid of Trinket later on?'

'That's all very well,' said Skybright, 'but I feel so angry. If I don't get it off my chest now, I shall burst,'

'What have you got to be angry about?' said Bao-yu, amused. 'You just concentrate on getting better.'

Skybright had already had one dose of her medicine. Towards evening she was given the second infusion. But although she perspired a bit during the night, it didn't really seem to do much good. She still had a temperature, her head still ached, her nose was still blocked, and she was still just as hoarse. In the morning Dr Wang came again, and after taking her pulses, made a few alterations in the prescription; but although the revised dosage brought down her temperature a little, her head still ached as before.

'Fetch the snuff,' Bao-yu commanded. 'If sniffing it can make her give a few good sneezes, it will clear her head.'

Musk went off to do his bidding and presently returned with a little oval box made of aventurine, edged and embellished with gold. Bao-yu took it from her and opened it. Inside the lid, in West Ocean enamel, was a picture of a naked, **yellow**-haired girl with wings of flesh. The box contained snuff of the very highest quality, which foreigners call *uncia,*

'Sniff some,' he told Skybright, who had taken the box and was gazing fascinatedly at the picture inside it. 'If you leave it open too long, it will lose its fragrance and then it won't be so good.'

Skybright took a little of the snuff with her fingernail and sniffed it up her nose; Nothing happened, so she scooped up a really large amount and sniffed again. A tingling sensation passed through the root of her nose, right up inside her cranium and she began to sneeze: four, five, six times in succession. Immediately her eyes and nose began to stream. She shut the box hurriedly with a laugh.

'Goodness, how it burns! Give me some paper.'

At once one of the younger maids handed her a wad of tissue. Skybright used sheet after sheet of it to blow her nose on.

'How's that?' said Bao-yu.

'Much clearer,' she said. 'But I still have this headache in the front of my head.'

'Now that we've started using foreign medicine, we may as well go the whole bog,' said Bao-yu. 'I expect we'll have you better again in no time. Musk, go to Mrs Lian's and tell her I said please could she let me have some of that Western stuff she uses to make her headache plasters with. It's called *yi-fu-na'*

Musk went off, returning after a goodish while with half a tablet. She hunted out a scrap of **red** satin and cut out

two little circles each about the size of a fingertips from it; then, having melted the yi-fu-na to an ointment-like consistency over the stove, she spread a little of it on each of them with a hairpin. Skybright stuck Them on herself, one over each temple, with the aid of a hand-mirror. Musk laughed.

'You already looked like a banshee to start with, with your ill face and your hair all over the place. Now, with those two things on you, you really do look a sight! Funny: one hardly notices them on Mrs Lian. I suppose it's because she wears them so often. —By the way;' she said, turning to Bao-yu, 'Mrs Lian asked me to tell you that tomorrow is your Uncle Wang's birthday and Her Ladyship wants you to go. Tell me what clothes you'll be wearing tomorrow so that I can get them ready now and not have to rush around in the morning.'

'Oh, anything,' said Bao-yu. 'Whatever comes first to hand. Birthdays! It's nothing but birthdays from one year's end to the next.'

He got up and left the room, intending to go to Xi-chun's place to see how she was getting on with the 'painting; but as he came out of the courtyard gate, he saw Ba~qin~ little maid Periwinkle hurrying across the pathway ahead of him and hurried forward to catch up with her.

'Where are you going?' he asked.

'To Miss Lin's,' said Periwinkle. 'Miss Xue and Miss Bao-qin are there alrea4y and I'm on my way to join them.'

Bao-yu changed his mind about going to see Xi-chun and accompanied Periwinkle to the Naiad's House. He found not only Bao-chai and Bao-qin there but Xing Xiu-yan as well. Dai-yu and her three visitors were sitting on the clothes-warmer gossiping, while Nightingale sat in the closet-bed alcove by the window, sewing. The girls laughed when they saw him enter.

'Another one? There's nowhere for you to sit.'

'What a charming picture!' said Bao-yu. "'A Bevy of Beauties Keeping Warm in Winter." I should have come earlier. Still, your room is so warm, I shall be perfectly all right on this chair.'

He sat on the chair that Dai-yu normally occupied. On this occasion it was covered with a squirrel-skin rug. A marble jardinière in the closet-bed alcove where Nightingale was sit ring caught his eye. It was full of single-petalled 'water nymph' narcissi growing in clumps of four or five flowers from each bulb.

'What beautiful flowers!' he said. 'The warmth of the room makes their scent even richer. How is it I didn't notice them yesterday?'

'They were given to Qin by your Chief Steward Lai Da's wife,' said Dai-yu: 'two pots of narcissi and two of winter-sweet. Qin gave these ones to me and one of the two pots of winter-sweet to Cousin Yun. I didn't really want them, but as she was kind enough to offer them to me, I thought it would be churlish not to accept. If you'd like them, I'd be very happy to pass them on to you.'

'Thank you,' said Bao-yu, 'but I've got two pots of them already. Though mind you, they are not as good as these. In any case, if Cousin Qin gave them to you, you can't possibly go handing them over to somebody else.'

'There's hardly a minute of the day when I haven't got a medicine-skillet on the stove,' said Dai-yu. 'I seem practically to live on medicine nowadays. The smell of medicine is bad enough as it is, but this heavy flower-scent on top of it makes me feel quite faint. Besides, the smell of medicine spoils the smell of the flowers, which is a pity. Much better carry them off somewhere where they can regain their purity away from competing odours.'

'I've got a sick person in *my* room today,' said Bao-yu. *'My* room is full of medicine-smells too. How did you know?'

'What an extraordinary question!' said Dai-yu. 'I know nothing about it. How should *I* know what goes on in

your room? I don't think you've teen attending to a word I've been saying. You're like someone who comes k half-way through a story and disturbs the rest of the audience by asking questions.'

'At least we shan't want for a theme at our next poetry meeting,' said Bao-yu. "'Narcissus "and "winter-sweet" will make splendid subjects.'

'Oh no!' wailed Dai-yu, burying her face in her hands. 'What's the point of having poetry meetings? Another meeting only means another lot of penalties. It's so shaming.'

'I suppose that's meant for me,' said Bao-yu, 'since *I'm* the one who's always getting penalized. But if it doesn't bother *me,* I don't see what you have got to go burying your face in your hands about.'

'I shall call the next meeting,' said Bao-chai brightly. 'There will be four themes for poems in Regular Verse and four for poems in other metres and everyone will have to do all eight of them. The first will be a three-hundred-line poem in pentasyllabics exhausting the rhyme "first". It's subject will be "On the Diagram of the Supreme Ultimate"?

Bao-qin laughed.

One can see that it isn't really poetry you're interested in but in making things difficult for others. It *could* be done, of course, if one really wanted to do it—it would simply be a question of selecting bits from the *Book of Changes* and torturing them into some sort of verse—but what would be the point?

'When I was eight I went with my father on one of his trips to buy foreign merchandise to one of the Western sea-ports and while we were there we saw a girl from the country of Ebenash. She was just like the foreign girls you see in paintings: long, **yellow** hair done into plaits, and her head was smothered in jewels: carnelians, cat's-eyes and emeralds. She was wearing a corslet of golden chain-mall and a dress of West Ocean brocade and she had a Japanese sword at her side covered all over with jewels and gold. Actually she was *more* beautiful than the foreign girls you see in paintings. They said that she had a perfect understanding of our literature and could expound the *Five Classics* and write poems in Chinese. My father asked her through an interpreter if she would write something for us in Chinese characters and she wrote out one of her own poems for him.'

The cousins were enthralled and Bao-yu eagerly begged her to show them the poem.

'That's not possible,' said Bao-qin. 'I left it behind in Nanking.'

Bao-yu was very disappointed.

'Just my luck!' he said. 'And I was hoping to broaden my experience.'

'Don't be a tease!' said Dai-yu, giving Bao-qin a tug. '*You* didn't leave anything behind in Nanking. Look at all the luggage you brought with you! I think you're making it up. The others can believe you if they like, but *I* don't.'

Bao-qin blushed and hung her head. She made no reply, but a little, secret smile was faintly discernible in her features.

'How like you to say that, Frowner!' said Bao-chai. 'You really are too sharp.'

'Well, if she's brought it with her, she ought to let us have a look and satisfy our curiosity,' said Dai-yu.

'She's got such a great pile of stuff,' said Bao-chai, 'she simply hasn't had time to go through it all yet. How does she know which of all those trunks and boxes she put it in? Wait until she's had time to sort her things out: no doubt she will come across the poem and let you see it then.' She turned to Bao-qin. 'Or perhaps you can remember it? If so, why don't you recite it for us now?'

'It was in Regular Pentameter,' said Bao-qin. 'I can remember that. For a foreigner it was really quite a good poem.'

'Hold on.!' said Bao-chai. 'If you are going to recite it, let me first send for Yun, so that she can hear it as well.'

She gave instructions to Periwinkle.

'Go back to my room and tell Miss Shi that we've got a beautiful foreigner here who can write poems in Chinese. Tell her that as she's so crazy about poetry, we thought she'd like to meet her. And tell her to bring that other poetry maniac with her when she comes.'

Periwinkle went off laughing to deliver the message. Presently Xiang-yan's voice, loudly inquiring 'Where's this beautiful foreigner?' could be heard outside, and a moment later she and Caltrop walked into the room.

'Ere yet the shape was seen, the voice was heard'

said the others, laughing. When xiang-yun and Caltrop were seated, Bao-qin repeated for their benefit what. she had just been telling the others. xiang-yun pressed her to recite the poem, and this she now proceeded to do:

The Land of Ebenash

Last night I dreamt I dwelt in marble halls;
Tonight beside the watery waste I sing.
The island's cloud-cap drifts above the sea,
And mists about its mountain forests cling.
Our pasts and presents to the moon are one;
Our lives and loves beyond our reckoning.
Yet still my heart yearns for that distant South,
Where time is lost in one eternal spring.

'Fancy a foreigner being able to write that!' said the cousins admiringly. 'It's better than we Chinese could do ourselves.'

While they were still enthusing over the poem, Musk arrived to report that someone had just been round with a message for Master Bao from Lady Wang.

'Her Ladyship says, when you go to your Uncle Wang's first thing tomorrow, will you tell them that she's sorry she can't go herself, but she's not feeling very well?'

Bao-yu stood up, out of respect for his mother, to reply. He asked Bao-chai and Bao-qin lf they would be going too. No, said Bao-chai, they had sent a present yesterday, and that was all they would be doing.

Conversation continued a little longer and then the company broke up. As Bao-yu politely insisted on the others going out before him, he would have been the last to leave, but just as he was about to do so, Dai-yu called him back.

Tell me,' she said, just how long *will* Aroma be away?'

'I don't know;' said Bao-yu, 'but she certainly won't come back until after the funeral?

Dai-yu evidently had something on her mind that she wanted to say but was finding difficulty in expressing. whatever it was, she must have abandoned it, for, after reflecting for a few moments ins in silence, all she said was:

You'd better go.'

Bao-yu, too, had a feeling that there were a lot of things he ought to be asking her, but he could not for the moment recollect what any of them were. After trying unsuccessfully to remember, he left her with a cheerful 'See you tomorrow' and went down the steps outside, his head bent low as he continued ruminating. Just as he was about to set out across the forecourt, something occurred to him and he remounted the steps and went in

again.

‘The nights are getting so much longer now. How many times do you cough in the night? Do you wake up very often?’

‘I’m much better at night than I was,’ said Dai-yu. ‘Last night I only coughed twice. But I still don’t sleep very well. Last night I only slept between about two and four in the morning. After that I couldn’t get hack to sleep again.’

‘Ah, I knew there was something important I wanted to ask you about,’ said Bao-yu. ‘I’ve just remembered what it was.’ He drew closer to her ear and went on in a lower voice. ‘You know that bird’s nest that Cousin Bao sent you,—’

But before he could finish, Aunt Zhao called in to inquire lf Dai-yu was feeling better. Dai-yu knew that she had dropped in on her way back from seeing Tan-chun, and that the kindness, if kindness it were, was of a-somewhat tangential nature; nevertheless she begged her with eager politeness to be seated and thanked her warmly for the visit.

‘How kind of you to think of me, Mrs Zhao and to come here yourself in such bitter weather!’

She ordered tea to be poured for her visitor) simultaneously darting a look at Bao-yu which he rightly interpreted as an order to make himself scarce. It was in any case time for his dinner, so he went to his mother’s place to have it. She made him go back early, bearing in mind that he must be up betimes next morning.

When he got back to his own room, Bao-yu found that Skybright had already taken her medicine. He judged it best to let her stay where she was in the closet-bed. He himself slept on the space outside the curtain which Musk had occupied the previous night. This time Musk slept on the clothes-warmer. He had it moved up beside the closet-bed before they went to bed, so that she could be near at hand during the night.

The night passed by without event.

*

Next day, before it was yet light, Skybright was calling on Musk to wake up.

‘Come on, Musk! You ought to be awake by now, Haven’t you slept enough yet? You go outside and tell the others to get his morning drink ready while I try waking him up.’

Musk hurriedly drew on a garment and got out of bed.

‘We’d better-both wake him and wait till he’s dressed and the clothes-warmer has been carried back to its usual place before we let the others it’,’ she said. ‘The old women have already said that he’s not to sleep in the same room as you in case he catches your sickness. We shall never hear the end of it, if they find out that we’ve been sleeping all crowded up together like this.’

‘Yes,’ said Skybright. ‘I was thinking that too.’

The two girls began calling Bao-yu. He must in fact have been awake already, for he got out of bed and began dressing immediately. Musk called in one of the junior maids to help her move the warmer back into place and fold up the bedding. Only when all traces of the previous night’s sleeping arrangements had been effaced were Ripple and Emerald called in to assist Bao-yu with his toilet.

‘It’s very overcast again,’ said Musk, when Bao-yu’s toilet had been completed. ‘It looks as lf it will snow. You’d better put on your felt.’

Bao-yu nodded and changed the outer garment he had put on for a more substantial one. A junior maid came in carrying a little tea-tray on which was a covered cup containing a concoction of **red** dates and Fukien lotus-seeds.

Bao-yu drank a few mouthfuls, took a piece of ginger from a saucerful of crystallized shapes held out to him by Musk and put it in his mouth to nibble, addressed a few brief admonitions to Skybright to look after herself while he was away, and went off to see his grandmother.

She had not yet risen when he arrived at her apartment, but the servants, knowing that he was going visiting and could not wait for her to get up, admitted him at once to her bedroom. He caught a glimpse of Bao-qin lying asleep behind her, her face turned inwards to the wall. The old lady observed that her grandson was wearing, over his formal dress of lychee-brown broadcloth, a dark-red felt cape embellished with roundels of gold thread and coloured silk embroidery. Its slate-**blue** satin border was fringed with tassels.

'Is it snowing?' she asked him.

'Not yet,' said Bao-yu, 'but it looks as if it will.'

Grandmother Jia turned to Faithful:

'Give him that peacock-feather cloak we were looking at yesterday.'

Faithful murmured a reply and went out of the room, returning presently with a magnificent snow-cape that gleamed and glittered with gold and **green** and bronzy-bluish lights. It was like Bao-qin's mallard-cape and yet somehow different.

'This is what they call "peacock gold",' said Grandmother Jia. 'It is made by the Russians. They twist the barbs of peacock-feathers into a kind of yarn and weave it from that. The other day I gave your cousin Bao-qin a cape like this made out of mallard feathers. Now I am giving this one to you.'

Bao-yu kotowed and put it on. Grandmother Jia smiled.

'Go and show your mother'

Bao-yu obediently hurried off to do so. On his way out he came upon Faithful, standing beside the kang in the outer room. She affected to be rubbing her eyes in order not to have to look at him. She had avoided speaking to him ever since the frightful scene nearly two months earlier when she had vowed never to marry, and Bao-yu was continually being made uncomfortable by her avoidance of him. Seeing her once more preparing to ignore him, he went up to her with a friendly smile in the hope of breaking her silence.

'Faithful, see this! How do you think I look in it?'

But Faithful simply turned and fled, retreating into Grandmother Jia's bedroom. Obliged to give up, he continued on his way to Lady Wang's. After his mother had seen the cape, he went into the Garden to show himself off to Musk and Skybright. After that he returned to his grandmother's to report.

'I showed it to Mother. She said it seems almost a pity to wear it and I must be very, very careful not to spoil it.'

'That was the only one I had left,' said Grandmother Jia. 'If you do spoil it I haven't got another one to give you. And there would be no question of getting another one made for you - not in these parts.'

She put on her admonitions-for-the-departing-grandchild voice:

'Now don't drink too much. And leave early.'

'Yes, Grandma.'

Old women from his grandmother's apartment accompanied him as far as the reception hall of the outer mansion. Below the steps outside it his foster brother Li Gui, together with Wang Rong, Zhang Ruo-jin, Zhao Yi-hua, Qian Sheng and Zhou Rui and the pages Tealeaf, Storky, Ploughboy and Sweeper, had been waiting a long time in readiness. The pages were carrying clothing-bundles and blankets, and two of the older men were holding a splendidly caparisoned horse by the bridle. The old women issued a few words of admonition to the men, the men, after acknowledging them with a few perfunctory cries, handed Bao-yu his whip and held the stirrup for him to mount, and Bao-yu, mindful of the precious cape, got up slowly into the saddle. The little party then began

to advance, Li Gui and Wang Rong, one on either side, holding the bridle-rings, Qian Sheng and Zhou Rul walking ahead, and Zhang Ruo-jin and Zhao Yi-hua following closely behind.

'Zhou, Qian,' Bao-yu called out from the saddle to the two in front, 'let's go out of the side gate, otherwise it will mean going past my father's door and I shall have to get down.'

'Since Sir Zheng went away, his door's kept locked all the time,' said Zhou Rui, turning a grinning face back to his young master. 'You don't need to get down.'

'Even though it is locked, I still ought to get down,' said Bao-yu.

'Quite right, sir,' said Li Gui and Qian Sheng approvingly. 'If you was to get slack about dismounting and Mr Lai or Mr .Lin was to see you, they'd be sure to have something to say about it. Even though they couldn't very well tell yon *off*, like enough they'd blame us for not teaching you manners.'

By now Zhou Rui and Qian Sheng were moving towards the side entrance. While the point of etiquette was still being discussed, they ran head on into Lai Da himself, of whom they had just been speaking. Bao-yu at once reined to a halt and made as if to dismount, but, Lai Da hurried up and prevented him by clinging to his leg. Bao-yu thereupon stood up in the stirrups and, taking him by the hand, addressed him graciously for some moments before continuing on his way. He had barely done so when thirty or forty pages armed with dustpans and brushes came trooping into the courtyard. Immediately they caught sight of Bao-yu, they lined up in a row along the wall and stood with their arms at their sides while one of their number, evidently the leader, stepped forward and, dropping to one knee in the Manchu salute, wished Bao-yu a good morning. Bao-yu did not know the page's name, so he merely smiled and nodded. The whole troop remained motionless until the horse and its rider had passed by.

Bao-yu's little party now issued out of the side gate, where ten horses were ready waiting for them: one for Li Gui and each of his fellows and one for each of the pages. All sprang at once into the saddle and were off down the street like a puff of smoke.

At this point our story leaves them and turns to other matters.

*

Back at **Green** Delights Skybright, exasperated to find, after another dose of her medicine, that the sickness still showed no disposition to depart, was holding forth loudly against the whole generation of doctors.

They're all cheats,' she said. 'They take your money, but none of the medicine they give you is any good.'

'Don't be so impatient,' said Musk soothingly. 'Getting better is always a lengthy business. You know what they say "Sickness comes like an avalanche but goes like reeling silk". This stuff isn't the Elixir of Life. You can't expect it to cure you in a twinkling. You'll be all right if you take things easy for a few days. Getting yourself worked up will only give the sickness a tighter grip on you.'

Skybright's anger changed direction and vented itself now upon the junior maids.

'Where have you lot all sneaked off to?' she called out to them. 'Very bold, aren't you, now that you seem helpless? Just you wait till I'm better: I'll have the hide off every one of you.'

Her outcry produced a solitary response. A little girl called Steadfast came hurrying in and inquired, 'What is it, Miss?'

'What's happened to the others?' said Skybright. 'Are they all dead? Are you the only one left alive?'

While she was speaking, Trinket, too, came in—at a somewhat more ambling pace than the other girl.

'Look at this little creature, now!' said Skybright. 'Why couldn't *she* have come sooner? You'd have come

running here fast enough if we'd been handing out monthly allowances or sharing out sweets, wouldn't you? *Then* you'd have been the first to arrive. Come closer. I'm not a tiger. I won't eat you.'

Trinket edged a few steps nearer. As she did so, Skybright suddenly raised herself from her lying position, snatched hold of her hand, and began jabbing at it violently with an enormous hairpin which she had been keeping concealed under her pillow.

'What do you want this little claw for?' she said. 'It's no good with a needle and thread. All it's good for is picking and stealing. Shifty eyes and light fingers! A little claw like this can only bring you disgrace. Much better *stab* it!—and *slab* it!—and *stab* it! so that it can't do any more thieving.'

Trinket was by now screaming with pain. Musk quickly dragged her away out of Skybright's clutches and forced Skybright to lie down again in bed.

'You've only just been sweating after the medicine,' she said. 'What's the matter with you? Do you want to die? If you'll just wait until you're better, you can punish her as much as you like. Don't start making a scene about it *now!'*

But Skybright insisted on calling in Mamma Song and dealing with the matter at once.

'Master Bao has told me to tell you that he finds Trinket lazy,' she said when Mamma Song arrived. 'She answers him back and doesn't do anything when he gives her orders, and even when Aroma tells her to do things she says rude things about her behind her back. Master Bao is most anxious that she should be dismissed immediately. He says he will speak to Her Ladyship about it himself when he sees her tomorrow.'

When Mamma Song heard this, she knew that the story of the bracelet must have leaked out.

'That's as may be,' she said. 'But oughtn't we to wait until Miss Aroma comes back and tell her first?'

'What I am giving you are Master Bao's own orders,' said Skybright. 'He was most particular that she Should be dismissed immediately. I don't see that Miss Aroma—or Miss Sweetscents or Miss Smellypots for that matter—has got anything to do with it. I know what I'm doing. Just do as I say. Go and get someone from her family to come here immediately and take her away.'

'You might just as well,' said Musk. 'She'll have to go sooner or later. Let them take her away now and get it over with.'

So Mamma Song had to go off and summon the girl's mother from outside. When Trinket had finished getting her belongings together, her mother went in with her to see Musk and Skybright.

'Now what's all this about?' she said. 'If the girl's done wrong, why can't you just punish her for it? Why do you have to dismiss her? It doesn't leave us much face, does it, if she's dismissed ?'

'You'll have to ask Bao-yu about that when he gets back,' said Skybright. 'It's nothing to do with us.' The woman sneered.

'You know perfectly well that I wouldn't dare. He always does what you young ladies want him to in any case. Even if I saw him and he agreed that she could stay, there's no guaranteeing that she would if you young ladies weren't agreeable. Take what you said just now. I know he's not here at the moment, but even so. if *I* was to name his name as you did just now without a "master" or a "mister" to it, people would say I was a savage, but for you young ladies, seemingly, it's quite all right.'

Skybright became **red** with anger.

'I called him by his name, did I? Why don't you go and report me to Their Ladyships? Tell them that I'm a savage and get *me* dismissed.'

'I advise you to take that girl out of here and be on your way,' said Musk. 'If you have anything to say, you can say it later. You can't stand here wrangling about it *now.* When have you ever seen other people bandying words

with us? Even Mrs Lai and Mrs Lin show a bit of restraint when they talk to us. And as for this business of saying "Bao-yu" instead of "Master Bao": everyone knows that it's Her Old Ladyship's particular wish that we *should.* Because he's not strong and she's afraid he might die young, she likes as many people as possible to use his name, to bring him luck. She even has it written in big characters and pasted up on walls outside to get people saying it. It would be funny if *we* couldn't use his name when every water-carrier and dung-carrier and beggar in town can do so. As a matter of fact only yesterday Mrs Lin got told off by Her Old Ladyship for calling him "Master Bao".

'And for another thing, we senior maids are constantly having -to take messages to Her Old Ladyship and Her Lady-ship about him, and when we do, we always say "Bao-yu", never "Master Bao". Why, I should think we must each of us use his name a couple of hundred times every day. You certainly chose the wrong thing to find fault with when you picked on that one! If you don't believe me, go round one of these days when you are free to Her Old Ladyship's or Her Ladyship's and you will hear us openly calling him "Bao-yu" to their faces. But of course, you don't have any important business that would bring you in contact with Their Lady-ships, do you? All your time is spent doing odd-jobs outside. One could hardly expect you to know the way things are done in *here*.

'But I'm afraid we really can't have you standing around here any longer. If you stay much longer, I'm afraid even though *we* don't object someone else may come along and ask what you are doing here. If you want to appeal against the girl's dismissal, you should get her out of here first and take it up with Mrs Lin afterwards and *she* will speak to Master Bao about it. With all the hundreds of people there are in this household we can't have just anyone running in and out whenever they feel like it. We don't even know the names of half of them.'

By way of emphasizing her point, Musk ordered one of the junior maids to fetch a floor-cloth and begin wiping the floor. At this Trinket's mother, unable to find a reply and fearful of being caught staying too long, swept out angrily, taking her daughter with her. But Mamma Song was not letting them get away so easily.

'You certainly don't have much idea of manners, my good woman. After all the time she's been here, your daughter could at least make the young ladies a kotow before she goes. She may have no other parting gift to give them—I don't suppose they'd set much store by it if she had— but she might at least have the decency to make - them a kotow. You can't both just up and go.'

Trinket was obliged to come in again and kotow to the two inside. She also went round to do the same for Ripple and Emerald, but they refused to look at her. After that she departed with her mother, the latter indicating as they went, by many a sniff and sigh, the hatred that she dared net express more openly.

A consequence of this latest exposure to the cold and of the accompanying emotional upset was that Skybright was now feeling bad again. At lighting-up time, after tossing about feverishly all day, she was just beginning to settle down at last when Bao-yu returned in a great fret and began stamping and groaning almost as soon as -he entered the room. Musk asked him what the matter was.

'It's this cloak that Grandmother gave me this morning. She was so pleased about it, and now—I don't know how it happened—I've gone and got a burn in it behind the lapel. Fortunately it was fairly dark just now when I came back and neither Grandmother nor Mother noticed anything.'

He took it off for Musk-to examine. It was only a little burn, about the size of a finger-print, but clearly visible.

'It must have been caused by a- spark from your hand-warmer,' said Musk. 'It's nothing to worry about. We'll send someone out on the quiet with it immediately to find a good invisible mender and get it mended for you.'

She wrapped it up and called in one of the old nannies to take it out for them.

'Tell them it has to be ready by daylight tomorrow. And for heaven's sake don't let Her Old Ladyship or Her Ladyship find out about it!'

The woman was gone a very long time. When she at last returned, she was still carrying the bundle with the peacock cloak in it.

'I've tried everywhere—invisible menders, tailors, embroiderers, seamstresses—and none of them will touch it. They all say they don't know what the material is and don't want to be responsible.'

'Oh dear!' said Musk. 'What are we going to do now? Well, you lust can't wear it tomorrow, that's all.'

'But I must,' said Bao-yu. 'Tomorrow is his actual birthday. Grandmother and Mother have both said I must. Today was only the first day of the celebrations, not his actual birthday. Isn't it just my luck to burn it the very first time I put it on?'

Skybright, who had listened to all this in silence, could contain herself no longer and sat up immediately in bed.

'Come on, let me have a look. If you weren't meant to wear it, you won't wear it. No good making all this fuss about it now.'

'There's something in that,' said Bao-yu laughing, and handed it to her. He brought the lamp over so that she could examine it more closely.

'This is made of "peacock gold",' said Skybright. 'If we could get hold of some of the thread .and make a little darn with it' I think it would probably pass.'

'We've got peacock gold thread,' said Musk. 'The trouble is that apart from you there's no one else here who could do the darning.'

'I shall just have to make the effort and do it then, shan't I?' said Skybright.

'No, that's out of the question,' said Bao-yu. 'You've only just started getting better. You're not in a fit state to do sewing yet.'

'Oh, don't be such an old woman!' said Skybright. *'I* know what I'm capable of.'

So saying, she sat up again in bed, knotted up her loosely flowing hair, and drew a jacket on over her shoulders. Her body felt abnormally light and she was almost overcome with dizziness. It really did seem as if the effort would be too much for her; but knowing what a state Bao-yu would be in if the snow-cape was not repaired, she gritted her teeth, and fighting back the weakness that threatened to engulf her, told Musk to pinch the yarn and thread a needle for her while she herself took a length of it and held it against the material.

'It's not really a very good match,' she said, 'but I don't suppose it will show very much when it's been darned.'

'I'm sure it will do very nicely,' said Bao-yu. 'At all events, we're not going to be able to find a Russian tailor to do it for us!'

Skybright began by opening up the seam of the lining underneath the burnt patch so that she could insert a cup-sized darning mushroom from inside. Having stretched the material out over the mushroom, she scraped away the charred parts and the surrounding nap with a razor until the threads were clearly exposed, then, with her needle and thread, she worked first across in one direction and then at right-angles in the other until she had filled the hole with a criss-cross darn. Using this as a foundation, she now began to weave the thread in and out with her needle so as to Imitate the surrounding pattern. This was the most difficult and exhausting part of the work. After each couple of stitches she had to stop and examine what she had done, and after every four or five she had to lean back on the pillow and rest. Meanwhile Bao-yu fussed around her unceasingly, one moment asking her if she would like a 'nice hot drink', another moment suggesting that she should rest, one moment fetching a squirrel-skin cloak to put over her shoulders, the next moment a pillow for her back, until she became quite frantic and had to entreat him to leave her alone

'My dear little grandfather—*please* just go to bed! If you stay up any longer, you'll have rings under your eyes in the morning, and that will never dot'

Bao-yu could see that he was exasperating her and made a pretence of settling down in his bed; but he could not get to sleep. After he had been lying awake for some time, he heard the chiming clock strike four. Skybright had just completed the mending and was finishing off the job by carefully teasing the nap out with a little toothbrush.

'That's wonderful,' said Musk. 'If you didn't look at it carefully, you could never tell it was a darn.'

Bao-yu asked to see.

'It's perfect,' he said. 'It looks exactly the same as the rest.'

Skybright had been coughing a good deal during the final stages of her task and it had been all she could do to conclude

it.

'Anyway, it's done,' she said. 'It doesn't really look right, but I can't do any more—Aiyo!'

With a cry of weariness she sank back, utterly exhausted, upon the bed.

If you wish to know the outcome, please read the chapter which follows.

CHAPTER 53

Ning-guo House sacrifices to the ancestors on New Year's Eve
And Rong-guo House entertains the whole family on
Fifteenth Night

SEEING that Skybright's repair of the peacock gold snow cape had so utterly exhausted her, Bao-yu called in a junior maid to help massage her and for a while they pummelled her between them. After that they all went to bed; but in less than no time it seemed to be broad daylight and they had to get up again. Instead of going straight off to his uncle's, however, Bao-yu first sent someone to summon Dr Wang. 'The doctor arrived promptly and proceeded to take Skybright's pulses. He appeared to be disconcerted by what he found.

'Yesterday she seemed to be a little better,' he said, 'but this pulse today takes us right back to where we started from—empty, superficial, faint, constricted. Now why should that be? She must have been eating or drinking too much. Either that, or she has been worrying about something. The original attack was not a serious one; but failure to take care of oneself after perspiration has been induced *can* be very serious.'

He went outside and wrote another prescription, which was presently brought in to Bao-yu. Bao-yu noticed that the sudorifics and decongestants of the earlier prescription had been omitted and restorative drugs to increase the vitality and nourish the blood, such as lycoperdon, nipplewort and angelica, had been substituted. He gave instructions for the medicine to be made up immediately. He seemed distressed.

'This is dreadful. If anything should happen to you after this, I shall never forgive myself.'

Skybright, lying back on her pillow, hooted derisively at his concern:

My dear young Master, just get on with your own affairs and don't worry about me. I'm not about to go into a decline, I assure you!'

Bao-yu was in any case obliged to go now; but having held out at his uncle's place until the afternoon, he managed to get back to her by pretending that he was feeling unwell.

Skybright was certainly quite ill. Fortunately she was normally an active, lively sort of girl, not given to moping and vapours; she had always been sensible—even abstemious—in her diet; and her constitution was a sound one. The Jias were great believers in the virtues of fasting. Masters and servants alike were put on a starvation diet at

the slightest hint of a cough or cold, the physic and nursing they received being considered of only secondary importance to this, and Skybright had been fasting now for two or three days, ever the influenza began. In addition to this, she had taken her medicine regularly and, except for the one night's lapse, had looked after herself reasonably well. Although the over-exertion set her back a few days, she was soon on the mend again. And as the new catering arrangements whereby the cousins now ate in their own apartments made ordering things much easier, Bao-yu was able to get all sorts of soups and broths made up to aid her recovery.

Omitting details of this convalescence, our story passes on to the return of Aroma, which occurred shortly after her mother's funeral. As soon as she got back, Musk told her all about Trinket and how Skybright had dismissed her first and reported the dismissal afterwards to Bao-yu. Aroma merely remarked that Skybright had been 'too hasty', but made no further comment.

Li Wan had herself now fallen a victim to the season's cold; Lady Xing was suffering from an inflammation of the eyes which necessitated Ying-chun's and Xiu-yan attendance on her both mornings and evenings to dress them for her; Mrs Li had been invited to spend some days with a younger brother and gone off taking Li Wen and Li Qi with her; and Bao-yu was preoccupied with Aroma, who was still thinking constantly of her mother and liable at any moment to break down, as well as with Skybright, who had still not entirely recovered. So what with one thing and another, no one felt much in the mood for writing poetry and one or two of the club's fixture-days went by without a meeting.

It was now well into the twelfth month and Lady Wang and Xi-feng were busily preparing for the New Year. The season of appointments brought news that Wang Zi-teng had been promoted to the post of Inspector-General of Armies in the Nine Provinces and that Jia Yu-cun was to become Under Secretary to the President of the Board of War with occasional duties at Court. Over in the Ning mansion Cousin Zhen had opened up the Hall of the Ancestors and set his people to work sweeping it, setting the vessels out in readiness for the New Year sacrifices, and welcoming the spirits back into the ancestral tablets. He also had the main hall of the Ning-guo mansion swept in readiness for the annual ceremonial hanging of the ancestral portraits. Everyone in both mansions, both high and low, was in a fever of activity.

One morning in the course of these preparations, as You-shi, who had not long since risen, was, with the assistance of Jia Rong's new wife, getting the presents of newly made clothes ready for sending to Grandmother Jia, a maid came in bearing a trayful of New Year medallions.

'It's from Merry, ma'am. He says that loose silver you gave him the other day was of several different marks but the total weight was one hundred and fifty-three taels and thirteen pennyweights and he says they've managed to make two hundred and twenty medallions from it.'

She held out the tray for You-shi to inspect. On it there were medallions shaped like plum-flowers, crabflower-shaped medallions, medallions with 'heart's desire' rebus patterns of ingot, brush and sceptre, and others with patterns of auspicious flowers.

'Yes,' said You-shi, 'they seem to be all right. Tell him to take them inside immediately.'

The maid went off to do her bidding. Shortly after that Cousin Zhen came in to have his lunch and Jia Rong's wife hurried out to avoid him.

'Have we received the bounty money for the New Year sacrifices yet?' Cousin Zhen asked You-shi when they were alone together.

'I sent Rong to draw it this morning,' said You-shi.

'It's not that we *rely* on the money exactly,' said Cousin Zhen, 'but it is after all the gift of the Emperor and I think we ought to draw it as soon as possible and get it across to Lady Jia so that it can be used to pay for the

offerings. It's a double blessing when the gracious favour shown us by His Majesty can be passed on to the ancestors. However many thousands of our own we were to spend on them, it wouldn't do them nearly as much honour as these offerings subsidized by the imperial bounty—not to mention the advantages that we enjoy as recipients of Imperial favour. And we have to remember that apart from the one or two great families like ours who don't really need this money, there are many, many families of poor hereditary officials who do actually depend on it for their ancestral sacrifices and who wouldn't be able to celebrate New Year properly without it. So you see it really was extraordinarily benevolent and far-seeing of the dynasty to institute this annual bounty.'

'Yes, indeed,' said You-shi.

'Master Rong is back,' a servant came in to report while the two of them were still talking.

'Tell him to come in,' said Cousin Zhen

Jia Rong entered carrying a little **yellow** bag, not as one would normally carry a bag, but holding it in both hands at shoulder height.

'You've been a long time, haven't you?' said Cousin Zhen.

Jia Rong smiled nervously.

'This year they're not paying it at the Board of Rites any longer but at the treasury of the Imperial Victuallers; so having first gone to the Board of Rites, I had to go from there all the way to the Imperial Victuallers to draw the money. The people at the Imperial Victuallers' office all asked after you, by the way. They say they haven't seen you for a long time, but they often think about you.'

'It's not me they think about but my things,' said Cousin Zhen with a dry smile. 'Either that, or they are hoping for an invitation to come round over the New Year.'

He was inspecting the **yellow** bag as he said this. It had a sealing-slip with the words

PERPETUAL BOUNTY

written on it in large characters. On the other side was the chop of the Department of Sacrifices of the Board of Rites and some columns of smaller characters:

Annual grant awarded in perpetuity to Jia Yan, Duke
of Ning-guo, and Jia Yuan, Duke of Rong-guo, for
New Year Sacrifices: goods to the value of—taels net
Cash received by: Jia Rong, Captain, Imperial Body-
guard, Inner Palace, on (*date*)
Issuing officer for the year: *(name)*

This was followed by a cipher in **red** ink.

After inspecting the **yellow** bag, Cousin Zhen had his lunch; then, when he had washed his hands and rinsed his mouth out, he changed into formal hat and boots and, ordering Jia Rong to follow him with the bag, set off for the other mansion to report the arrival of the bounty-money, first to Grandmother Jia and Lady Wang and then to Jia She and Lady Xing next door. When they got back he took out the money and ordered the bag to be carried into the Hall of the Ancestors and burnt there in the great incense-burner in front of the ancestral tablets.

There were further orders now for Jia Rong:

'I want you to go and ask your Aunt Lian whether she's decided yet on which days she'll be entertaining in the

New Year. If she has, get the office to make out a good, clear list of the dates, so that we don't have any duplicating this year. Last year several families got invitations from both of us for the same day, and of course, people being what they are, instead of realizing that it was a mistake, they assumed that we had deliberately worked it out between us as an economy.'

Jia Rong hurried off to see Xi-feng, returning presently with the list of dates that his father had asked for. After running his eye over it, Cousin Zhen handed it to a servant.

'Give this to Lai Sheng. Tell him to avoid these dates when he sends out our New Year invitations.'

He and Jia Rong went on to inspect operations in the hall, where a number of pages were carrying in and arranging the large screens on which the portraits of the ancestors were to be hung, and cleaning and polishing the tables and the ritual vessels of gold and silver which were to be set up in front of them. While they were thus engaged, a page came in holding a **red** greetings-card and a schedule containing some sort of list.

'Bailiff Wu from Black Mountain village, sir. He's just arrived.'

'That old rascal?' said Cousin Zhen. 'He's been long enough getting here!'

Jia Rong took the greetings-card and schedule from the servant, and opening up the card, held it out for his father to read. Cousin Zhen folded his hands behind his back and bent over to read the inscription:

Wu Jin-xiao, Bailiff, presents his Humble Compliments
to the
Master and Mistress
and compliments to
The Young Gentlemen and Ladies
wishing you
Wealth, Health and Prosperity
Increase of Pay and Promotion
and
all your Heart's Desire in the
Coming Year

Cousin Zhen laughed.

'These country people have an original sense of style.'

'Never mind the style,' said Jia Rong, echoing his father's laughter with obsequious laughter of his own, 'just think of all the good luck he is wishing us!'

He opened up the schedule and held it out while Cousin Zhen ran his eye down the list:

tufted deer		30
water deer		50
spotted deer		50
Siamese pigs		20
scalded pigs		20
wild boar	20	
wild pigs	20	
salted pigs		20
wild sheep		20

goats 20
scalded sheep 20
sheep, salted in fell 20
sturgeons 200
fish, various 200
live chickens, ducks and geese (each) 200
dried ditto (each) 200
pheasants & hares (each) 200 brace
bear's paws 20 pairs
deer's sinews 20 catties
sea-slugs 50 catties
deer's tongues 50
ox-tongues 10
dried mussels 20 catties
filberts, pine-nuts, peach-kernels, almonds (each) 2 bags
crayfish 50 pairs
dried shrimps 200 catties
high quality selected Silver Frost charcoal 1000 catties
medium grade ditto 2000 catties
red charcoal 30,000 catties
red Emperor rice 5 bushels
green glutinous rice 60 bushels
white ditto 60 bushels
powder rice 60 bushels
millet, sorghum & other grains (each) 60 bushels
general purpose rice 2500 bushels
dried vegetables 1 cartload
Item, total realized from sales of livestock and cereals 2500 taels silver
Item, Present for the young ladies and gentlemen(Pets) 2 deer
4 pair white rabbits
4 pair black rabbits
2 pair golden pheasants
2 pair Foreign ducks

'Bring him in,' said Cousin Zhen when he had finished perusing the schedule.

Wu Jin-xiao promptly appeared. He knelt down in the courtyard below and had already kotowed and called out his greetings before Cousin Then could have him raised up and brought into the hall.

'You are still hale and hearty then?' Cousin Then asked him.

'Yes, sir, thank you sir,' said the old man, beaming. 'I still manage to get about.'

'Your sons must be quite big fellows by now,' said Cousin Then. 'Why don't you let them do the travelling for you?'

‘To tell you the truth, sir, I’m so used to the journey, I’d miss it now if I wasn’t to come. Shouldn’t know what to do with myself. The boys would be only too glad to come if I’d let them, of course—see what it’s like here “in the Emperor’s shadow” as we say—but they’re only youngsters yet: I’d be afeared of them having some mishap on the way. A few years longer and I shan’t need to worry.’

‘How many days have you been on the road?’ said Cousin *Then.*

‘Well, sir, as you know, there was a lot of snow this year: it must have been lying three or four foot thick in places. And that sudden thaw we had coming on top of it made the going very difficult. That must have put us back several days. It’s taken a month and two days altogether. But I do assure you, sir, seeing that the time was running out and knowing how anxious you’d be, we made as much speed as we could.’

‘I was wondering what could have made you so late,’ said Cousin Then. ‘Well, I’ve been looking at this list of yours. I see you’re holding out on me again this year, you old devil.’

Wu Jin-xiao advanced a couple of steps—springing, as it were, to his own defence:

‘It’s like this, sir. The harvests this year have been really terrible. From the third month to the eighth month it rained on and off all the time. I doubt we had six fine days in a row together. Then in the ninth month we had hall as big as teacups. For fifty miles around, the damage to crops and livestock—and houses and people as well, for that matter—was terrible. That’s why I haven’t brought you more this year. That’s the honest truth, sir. You know I wouldn’t lie to you.’

‘I’d reckoned on your bringing me at least five thousand taels,’ said Cousin Then, frowning. ‘What am I supposed to do with an amount like this? We have only eight or nine farms now and of those eight or nine two have declared themselves disaster areas this year and aren’t contributing anything. With you holding back on me too, I might as well give up celebrating New Year altogether.’

‘Your lands have done better than some,’ said Wu Jin-xiao. ‘Take my cousin’s place. That’s only thirty mile from where I am, but my word, what a difference! My cousin manages eight farms for your relations at the other House. They’ve got several times as much land as you, but the vittles he’s brought them this year are no more than this lot here, and their cash yield on sales is no more than two or three thousand. Now they really *ha~* got something to make a fuss about.’

‘It’s true,’ said Cousin Then. ‘We’re not *too* badly off on this side. At least we haven’t got any new major commitments outside our regular annual expenditure. For us it’s a question of spending a bit more freely when we’re flush and economizing a bit when things are tighter. And even in the case of these New Year expenses, I suppose I *could* cut down on them if I really had to. It would simply be a question of brazening it out. But with our Rong-guo cousins it’s different. They’ve had all these new expenses during the past few years, none of which were optional, but no new source of income to set against them. Which means that for the past year or two they’ve had to start eating into their capital. If *you* folk can’t help them to make up the deficit, who else is there they turn to?’

‘I know they’ve got a lot on their plate,’ said Wu Jin-xiao with a knowing smile, ‘but it can’t *all* be outgoings, can it? There must be something coming in as well. Surely Her Grace and old Live-For-Ever must give them a hand-out once in a while?’

Cousin Then turned to Jia Rong with a laugh.

‘You heard that? Rich, isn’t it?’

Jia Rong tittered.

‘What does a countryman like you living at the back of beyond know about such matters? You don’t suppose Her

Grace has handed them the keys of the Emperor's treasury, do you? She's not her own mistress, even if she wanted to. She does give presents, of course, but it's only on birthdays and feastdays and the like and never more than a few lengths of figured satin or some curios or knick-knacks. Even when she gives money, at the very most it will be a hundred gold. Now say a hundred gold is worth a thousand silver taels—it can't be much more than that—what possible good can a thousand taels do them, when during each of the past two years they've been forced to draw on their capital to the tune of several thousands a year? During the first of those two years they had the Visitation—including the building of that great garden. Just imagine what *that* must have cost them. Another two years like these last two with another Visitation thrown in and they'll be cleaned out!'

'These simple country souls see "the bright outside but not the dark within",' said Cousin Zhen. 'The situation our Rong-guo cousins are in is like the proverbial chime-hammer made of phellodendron wood: imposing to look at but bitter inside.'

'You can tell they really *are* hard-up,' said Jia Rong half jokingly. 'The other day I heard Auntie Lian plotting with Faithful to steal some of Lady Jia's things to use as security for a loan.'

'No, I think that was merely our Feng being her usual artful self,' said Cousin Then, laughing. 'They're still not *that* poor. I expect she has noticed how much they have been spending. beyond their means and is planning some economy or other. What you overheard would simply have been her way of letting people know how hard-up they are and preparing them for some cuts. I've got a rough idea of how their finances stand at present and I assure you that they aren't quite as desperate as *that* yet.'

Concluding the conversation on this more reassuring note, Cousin Then gave Wu Jin-xiao into the charge of the servants with instructions that he was to be properly looked after and entertained. Our narrative does not follow the old man into the servants' quarters, however, but remains in the hall with Cousin Then.

Cousin Then had a portion of the things that Wu Jin-xiao had brought set aside to be used as offerings to the ancestors; he had another portion set aside for sending to Rong-guo House; and while Jia Rong attended to its delivery, he personally supervised the selection of a third portion which he intended to keep for his own use. What remained he had piled up in orderly heaps on the pavement beneath the hall terrace to be shared out among the junior members of the clan, who were forthwith invited to come and collect their shares.

At that point a large consignment of things arrived from the other mansion, most of them things to be used in the ancestral sacrifices, but some of them for Cousin Then himself. Having given orders for their disposal, Cousin Then went back to his supervision of the polishing and furniture-shifting in the hall. When that work was completed, he put on a lynx-skin coat and went out, still in his slippers, on to the terrace, where, having found himself a warm place under the eaves, he got the servants to spread out a wolfskin rug for him so that he could sit there and watch the young clansmen as they came to collect their shares. He noticed that Jia Qin was among them.

'What are *you* doing here?' he called out to him. 'Who told *you* to come?'

Jia Qin came over and stood in front of him, arms held submissively at his sides.

'I heard that you were having a family share-out, Uncle, so I came along without waiting to be called.'

'These things I'm giving away now are intended for those of your uncles and cousins who haven't got jobs or private incomes to support them,' said Cousin Then. 'During the years when you were unemployed yourself, I used to give you a share of the New Year things. But you aren't unemployed now: you've got that supervisor's job that my Rong-guo cousins gave you, looking after those young nuns in the family temple. Not only have you got a salary of your own, but you control all the nuns' allowances as well. Yet still you come here for my things. You are too greedy. And just look at you! No one would think from your appearance that you had money to

spend and a responsible position. You used to have the excuse that you had no money, but what excuse have you got now? You look even more disreputable now than you did when you were unemployed!'

'I've got a big family to support,' said Jia Qin. 'I have a lot of expenses.'

'Humbug!' said Cousin Then. 'I know what you get up to in that temple of yours, don't think I don't! Once you set foot in that place, *you* are the master and nobody there can gainsay you. With money to spend and the rest of us a long way away in the city, you can do exactly as you like: invite the local riff raff in every night to gamble with you and fill the place with your kept women and fancy boys. So having squandered all the money and reduced yourself to the disgraceful state I see you in now, you have the effrontery to try and get something out of *me*. All you are likely to get out of *me*, young man, is a good stout stick across the shoulders! And when this holiday is over, I shall make it my business to have a word with your Uncle Lian and see to it that he has you recalled.'

Jia Qin reddened, but dared not say anything.

A servant came up then to report:

'Someone with a present from the Prince of Bei-jing, sir. Two scrolls and a perfume-bag.'

Cousin Then turned to Jia Rong.

'Go and entertain him for me. Tell him I'm out.'

Jia Rong hurried off.

Cousin Zhen then dismissed Jia Qin, and having presided over the distribution until all the things had been taken, returned to his own apartment to have his dinner with You-shi.

Concerning the rest of that day and the night which followed our narrative is silent.

The day after that was even busier. But to give further details of these preparations would be tedious. Suffice it to say that by the twenty-ninth of the twelfth month they had been completed. In both mansions new door-gods had been pasted up on all the doors, the inscribed boards at the sides and over the tops of gateways had been repainted, and fresh 'good luck' slips—auspicious couplets written in the best calligraphy on strips of **scarlet** paper—had been pasted up at the sides of all the entrances. In the Ning-guo mansion the central doors of the main outer gate, of the ornamental gate, of the outer reception hall, of the pavilion-gate, of the inner reception hall, of the triple gate dividing the inner from the outer parts of the mansion, and of the inner ornamental gate were all thrown Open, so that a way was opened up from the street right through into the family hall inside. **Red** lanterns on tall **scarlet** stands lined either side of this route. At dusk, when the candles in them were lit, they took on the appearance of two long, parallel serpents of light, undulating slightly where they ascended or descended the steps of terraces.

Next day, the last of the Old Year, Grandmother Jia and any of the Jia ladies who possessed patents of nobility attired themselves in the court dress appropriate to their rank and were borne in procession to the Palace, Grandmother Jia at the head in a palanquin carried by eight bearers, to make their kotows to the Imperial Concubine and felicitate her on the successful conclusion of the year. On their return from the banquet which she gave them, their chairs were set down outside the pavilion-gate of the Ning-guo mansion, where those of the younger Jia males who had not escorted them to the Palace were lined up on either side of the gateway waiting to receive them. When the ladies had all alighted, the young men conducted them on foot to the Jia family's Hall of the Ancestors.

Bao-qin had never been inside this part of the mansion before. She was being allowed in on this occasion by virtue of her recent adoption into the family and was anxious to take in every detail in order that she might retain as accurate an impression of it as possible.

The Jia family's Hall of the Ancestors was in a separate courtyard of its own in the west part of Ning-guo House, away from the more domestic parts of the mansion—a courtyard that was entered through an imposing five-frame gateway behind a black-lacquered wooden paling. An inscription in large characters hung over the central arch of the gate:

ANCESTRAL TEMPLE
OF THE
JIA FAMILY

with a column of smaller characters in the lower left hand part of the board indicating that the calligrapher was a direct descendant in the sixty-somethingth generation of the Sage Confucius. A long couplet from the brush of the same calligrapher occupied the two vertical boards at the arch's sides:

With loyal blood poured out willingly upon the ground
a myriad subjects pay tribute to their benevolent rulers

For famous deeds lauded resoundingly to the skies
a hundred generations offer sacrifices to their heroic ancestors

Inside the gate a raised white marble walk shaded by an avenue of venerable pines and cypresses led up to a terrace on which ancient bronze tripods were ranged. Over the entrance to the temple's vestibule, whose penthouse-roof swept forwards from the main building's façade, hung a board framed in a carved and gilded border of nine interlacing dragons and inscribed in the Late Emperor's calligraphy with the following words:

HIS MINISTERS ARE AS SHINING STARS

The vertical inscriptions on either side were in the same Imperial hand:

Their achievements outshone the celestial luminaries
Their fame is reflected in the generations that come after them

The board over the entrance to the main hall of the temple was framed by two contending dragons and its inscription was of incised characters infilled in **green.** Both it and the matching couplet below it were in the calligraphy of the reigning sovereign:

HONOUR THE DEAD AND KEEP THEIR MEMORIAL

Their sons and grandsons enjoy the fruits of their blessedness
The common people recall Ning and Rong with kindness

Beyond the flickering brilliance of many lights and the glint and sheen of drapes and hangings Bao-qin could

make out some of the spirit tablets of the ancestors, but not very clearly.

By ancient custom the menfolk were divided in ranks to left and right of the hall so that each generation was on a different side from the one which followed it, fathers and sons separated, grandfathers and grandsons together. Jia Jing presided over the sacrifice with Jia She acting as his assistant; Cousin Then held the drink-offering; Jia Lian and Jia Cong the silk-offering; Bao-yu carried the incense; Jia Chang and Jia Ling unrolled the kneeling-mat in front of the great incense-burner Then the black-coated musicians struck up and the ceremony began.: the threefold offering of the Cup, the standings, kneelings and prostrations, the burning of the silk-offering, the libation—every movement precisely in time to the solemn strains of the music. The music ceased at the same time as the ceremony, and the participants filed out and, grouping themselves round Grandmother Jia, conducted her to the main hall of the Ning-guo mansion where, under the richly-embroidered frieze which hung high in front of them, against a background of brilliantly-decorated screens, high above the smoking incense and flickering candles of the altar, the portraits of the ancestors hung, those of the ducal siblings, Ning-guo and Rong-guo, resplendent in dragon robes and jade-encrusted belts, in the centre and somewhat raised above the rest.

The men ranged themselves in ascending order of seniority in the space between the hall and the ornamental gate, so that the two most junior ones, Jia Xing and Jia Zhi, were just inside the gate and the two most senior ones, Jia jing and Jia She, were at the top of the terrace steps and under the eaves of the hall. The womenfolk of the family were ranged inside the hall in corresponding ranks but in reverse order: that is to say, the most junior were nearest the threshold and the most senior furthest inside the hall, but whereas the senior male in a generation was at the east end of his row, the senior female in the same generation would be at the west end of hers, and *vice versa*. The male domestics of all ages were ranged in the courtyard on the further side of the ornamental gate.

The manner of making the offerings was as follows Each ‘course’ was passed from hand to hand by the servants until it reached the ornamental gate. There it was received by Jia Xing and Jia Zhi and passed on from hand to and until it reached Jia Jing at the top of the terrace steps. Jia Rong, as senior grandson of the senior branch of the family, was permitted, alone of all the males, to stand inside the threshold with the women. He received the dishes from his grandfather Jia Jing’s hands and passed them to his wife, Hu-shi. Hu-shi passed them to the row ending in Xi-feng and You-shi, who passed them forwards to Lady Wang standing at the side of the altar. Lady Wang then put them into the hands of Grandmother Jia, who raised them up reverently towards the portraits before laying them down on the altar in front of her. Lady Xing stood to the west of the altar facing eastwards and helped her lay them down. When meat, vegetables, rice, soup, cakes, wine and tea had all been transmitted to the altar by this human chain and offered up there by Grandmother Jia and her two daughters-in-law, Jia Rong withdrew and took up his position next to Jia Qin in the courtyard below, at the head of the most junior generation of Jia family males.

Now came the most solemn part of the ceremony. As Grandmother Jia, clasping a little bundle of burning joss sticks with both her hands, knelt down for the incense-offering, the entire congregation of men and women, rank upon rank of them, close-packed as flowers in a flower-bed, knelt down in perfect time with her and proceeded to go through the motions of the Great Obeisance. This was done with such silent concentration that, from five-frame hall and three-frame vestibule, from portico and terrace, terrace steps and courtyard, for some minutes nothing could be heard but the faint tinkling made by jade girdle-pendants and tiny golden bells and the soft scrape and scuffle of cloth-soled boots and shoes.

The ceremony over, Jia Jing, Jia She and the rest of the menfolk hurried back to the Rong-guo mansion so that they could be waiting there in readiness to make their kotows to Grandmother Jia on her return.

In You-shi's main reception-room, whither the ladies repaired now from the hall, the floor had been entirely covered with a great **red** carpet and a huge gold cloisonné incense-burner with a loach-lipped rim and three massive legs shaped like the trunks of elephants stood in the middle.

In the centre of the kang—also new-carpeted, but in scarlet—a dark-red back-rest had been placed with a design showing a couchant dragon coiled around the character for 'longevity'. Large bolsters of the same colour and with the same design on them had been placed as arm-rests at right-angles to it; for extra warmth a black fox-fur had been draped around the top of it, and there was a white fox-fur mg between the bolsters, for sitting on. When Grandmother Jia had been installed on this furry throne, several old great aunts were invited to sit on fur rugs that had been spread out on the kang to left and right of it. Lady Xing, Lady Wang and other ladies of their generation were installed on fur rugs on a smaller kang in an alcove-room to the side of the main kang and discreetly separated from it by an openwork wooden screen. On the floor below, in two facing rows, were a dozen carved lacquer chairs, on which Bao-qin and the other cousins were invited to sit. They had chair-backs and seat-covers of squirrel, and large copper foot-warmers in place of footstools.

You-shi and her daughter-in-law Hu-shi now appeared with tea-trays in their hands, and while You-shi offered tea to Grandmother Jia, Hu-shi served the old aunties. After that You-shi passed into the alcove and served tea to Lady Xing and the other ladies on the smaller kang, and Hu-shi served the cousins sitting in chairs below. Xi-feng, Li Wan and a few other young married women of their generation, debarred from taking tea either with the elder ladies or with their young unmarried cousins, stood idly by, on the floor below the kang, 'in attendance'. Lady Xing and her group, as soon as they had finished drinking their tea, rose and moved over to where Grandmother Jia was sitting on the kang so that they too might be 'in attendance'.

After exchanging a few words with the other old ladies while she sipped her tea, Grandmother Jia gave orders for her palanquin to be made ready. At once Xi-feng climbed up on to the kang and began helping her to her feet.

'But we've already prepared dinner for you here,' said You-shi. 'You never stay with us for dinner on New Year's Eve. Won't you make an exception just this once? Surely my catering can't be all that inferior to Feng's?'

Xi-feng continued to help Grandmother Jia from the kang. 'Come on, Grannie, let's be getting home! Pay no attention to lien'

Grandmother Jia laughed.

'You're so busy with the sacrifices,' she said. 'You're worked off your feet as it is; I'm sure you don't want the bother of feeding me as well. Besides, in past years when I haven't stayed, you have Sent the food over to me. Why don't you do that again this year? I don't feel like eating very much now; but if you send it over, I shall be able to save it up for tomorrow, and then I shall be able to eat more of it than I could now.'

This made everyone laugh.

'See that you get someone thoroughly dependable to sit up and keep an eye on the candles tonight,' Grandmother Jia said by way of parting admonition. 'Where fire is concerned, one can't afford to take chances.'

You-shi, escorting her meanwhile from the room, assured her that she would do so.

At the pavilion-gate You-shi and the other ladies hid them-selves behind the gate-screen from the eyes of the waiting menservants while Grandmother Jia got into her palanquin. Pages of the Ning-guo mansion went ahead of the bearers and, as they approached the outer gate, directed them through the centre of its three gateways. Lady Xing and Lady Wang followed in their less imposing conveyances, accompanied by You-shi, who was also going over to the other mansion.

Outside, while they were being borne in a westerly direction down the street, the ladies could see the achievements, insignia and musical instruments (bells, gongs, stone-chimes and drums hung in magnificently

carved, painted and tasselled stands) of the Dukes of Ning-guo and Rong-guo, those of the Duke of Ning-guo along the eastern half of the street outside the south wall of the Ning-guo property, and those of his brother-duke outside the Rong-guo wall to its west.

As in the other mansion, the centre-gates throughout Rong-guo House were all thrown open so that a way was clear from the outer gate right through to the Hall of Exalted Felicity inside. But this time, instead of going through to the pavilion-gate and getting out there, they turned left after the outer reception hall and were carried to the main reception hall in Grandmother Jia's part of the mansion. The others assembled round the old lady as they got out of their sedans and followed her into the hall. Here, too, everything had been transformed: brilliantly embroidered screens and cushions specially brought out for the occasion and an incense-burner set down in the middle of the room from which emanated delicious odours of pine and cedar and Hundred Blend aromatic.

As soon as Grandmother Jia was seated, a venerable nannie came up to her to report that 'the old ladies had arrived to make their kotow' and she hurriedly got up again and advanced to welcome two or three elderly female relations who had just come into the hall. A good deal of polite tussling ensued, accompanied on both sides by laughter and protestations, as Grandmother Jia took the hands of each old lady in turn and, while the old ladies pretended that they were struggling to kneel, made a great show of struggling to prevent them—for although Grandmother Jia was their senior, they were in the same generation as her and too elderly to be allowed to kotow in earnest. They sat down for a while after that and took a cup of tea; then Grandmother Jia saw them out, but no farther than the inner ornamental gate.

When she had returned and was once more enthroned on the principal seat in the hall, Jia Jing and Jia She came forward with all the menfolk in the family in rows behind them to make their kotow.

'You all do so much for me during the year,' Grandmother Jia protested. 'Can't we forget about the kotow?'

But nobody heeded her. Rank upon rank of them, the males in one large group and the females in another, knelt down together and bowed their foreheads to the ground. After that folding chairs were brought and put down in a row to left and right of Grandmother Jia's seat and the next most senior members of the family sat down and received *their* kotows, and so on by order of seniority downwards, until all but the most junior members of the family had been kotowed to; but now even *their* turn arrived and they too were allowed to sit down as the domestics of both households, men-servants and women-servants, pages and maids, came in by order of their various ranks and duties and made *their* kotows to their employers.

After that the New Year's Eve wish-penny was distributed to servants and children—gold or silver medallions in little embroidered purses—and the New Year's love-feast was laid, tables on the east side of the hall for men and boys, tables on the west side for girls and women. There was herb-flavoured New Year's Eve wine and love-feast soup, there were lucky-cakes and wish-puddings; and when all had eaten and drunk, Grandmother Jia rose and went into an inner room to change out of her Court dress, which she had all this time been wearing. This was a signal for the others present to disperse.

As darkness came on, offerings of cakes and burning joss sticks were made in front of all the Buddha-shrines and in all the little niches of the Kitchen God, who is welcomed back this night from his annual trip aloft. In the main courtyard, outside Lady Wang's apartment, an 'altar to heaven and earth' was set up - a long table on which offerings of sticky fried honey-sticks and fresh apples and steamed wheat-flour cakes and other goodies had been built up, layer upon layer, into a little pagoda of offerings in front of a large colour-print representing the whole host of heaven (or as much of it as the artist had been able to fit in). Great horn lanterns hung at either side of the main entrance to Prospect Garden to illuminate the gateway, and innumerable standard lamps lit up its alley-ways and courtyards and walks. As for the inhabitants of the mansion, all of them, both masters and servants, seemed,

in their dazzling holiday array, like walking flower-gardens of brilliant embroidery and brocade. And all night long a confused hubbub of talking and shouting and laughter arose, punctuated by the continual, unceasing pops and bangs of exploding firecrackers.

At four o'clock in the morning, as the drums of the fifth watch were sounding, Grandmother Jia and the other ladies once more got into their court dresses and were borne in procession to the Palace, this time to felicitate Yuan-chun on the advent of the New Year. Livened footmen walked ahead of them carrying the full paraphernalia to which Grandmother Jia's rank entitled her. Once more Yuan-chun feasted them; once more, on their return from the Palace, they made offerings to the ancestors in their shrine in the Ning-guo mansion; and once more, on returning to her own apartment in Rong-guo House, Grandmother Jia received the prostrations of the assembled family. As soon as that was over, she changed out of her court clothes and declared that she was going to rest, refusing to see any of the friends and relations who now began arriving in great numbers to offer their New Year felicitations, and spending her time either quietly conversing with Aunt Xue and Mrs Li or, as an occasional diversion, playing games of cards or Racing Go with Bao-yu and the girls.

But Lady Wang and Xi-feng, on both this and each of the seven or eight days which followed, were kept busy entertaining the guests whom the family had invited to drink their New Year wine. In both the reception hall and the courtyard outside it there were plays to watch and tables at which the unending stream of visitors could sit for a while and eat and drink while they watched them.

And no sooner was that lot of entertaining over than another lot had to be prepared for as the First Moon waxed greater and the Lantern Festival drew near. Again the Ning and Rong mansions were gay with lanterns and decorations. On the eleventh of the month Jia She entertained Grand-mother Jia and the rest of the family and on the twelfth it was Cousin Zhen's turn to play host, while for several days running Lady Wang and Wang Xi-feng were most of the time out visiting one or other of the innumerable families from whom they bad received invitations.

On the evening of the fifteenth Grandmother Jia had tables laid for a feast in her big 'new' reception hall—the scene of Xi-feng's fateful birthday-feast. A stage was set up for a troupe of child-actors which she had specially hired for this occasion, and both the stage and hall were hung all over with lanterns of every imaginable shape and colour. When her preparations were completed, she summoned all her children and grandchildren, nephews and nieces, great-nephews and great-nieces to a family feast.

As a matter of fact it is not strictly true that *all* of them were invited. Jia Jing was, for religious reasons, a total abstainer from meat and strong drink, so he was not invited. Obligations to the dead rather than to the living had brought him back for the holiday, and on the seventeenth, two days after this, as soon as the last of the ancestral sacrifices was over, he returned to his Taoist monastery outside the city and the briefly interrupted pursuit of immortality. Meanwhile, when not actually engaged in discharging ceremonial duties, he spent all the time on his own in a quiet, out-of-the-way corner of the mansion, in a state of incommunicado with the other members of the family.

And Jia She, although he was invited, excused himself as soon as he had received a party-gift from his mother. She knew that he felt uncomfortable in her presence and did not attempt to detain him. Back in his own quarters, surrounded by cronies and dependants, he could drink and admire the lanterns while beautiful young women played and sang for his delectation:

> Ears with pipes and songs beguiled,
> Eyes by silk skirts hypnotized.

—A different scene altogether from the one he had just left.

But let us return to the latter—to the reception hall in Grandmother Jia's rear courtyard, where a covered stage had been erected to accommodate the players.

Inside the hall some dozen or more tables had been laid facing outwards towards the stage. They were arranged in a fan shape, with the two central tables in the place of honour at the back and the rest of them raying out forwards to left and right of them. At the side of each table a smaller, ornamental table had been placed on which were arranged

1. a little three-piece incense set (a vase, a cassolette and a tripod, all made on a miniature scale out of metal) in which Hundred Blend aromatic—a gift from the Palace—was burning;

2. a porcelain dish, eight inches long, four or five inches wide and two or three inches deep, containing a miniature landscape made out of stones and mosses;

3. a small japanned tea-tray on which was one of Grandmother Jia's best china teacups and a little individual *mille fiori* teapot in which choicest tea was brewing;

4. a little table-screen of **red** silk gauze, embroidered with flowers and appropriate lines of 'grass character' verse, framed in a delicately carved pierced-work sandalwood frame;*

5. a vase (each one a collector's piece and each different from the rest) containing the three friends winter' or riches in a jade hall' or some other flower arrangement, mostly of fresh flowers that had been specially forced for the occasion.

The two tables in the place of honour at the back were occupied by Aunt Xue and Mrs Li. To their left, at the head of the row of tables radiating outwards towards the east side of the hall, there was a large, low wooden settle with a carved

* *Stone's Note to* Reader:

These screens were embroidered by a Soochow girl called Hui-niang, who, as member of a highly-cultivated Service family and an accomplished amateur painter and calligrapher, embroidered only occasionally for her own diversion and not as a means of making money. As the flowers embroidered on them were all copied from flower-paintings by famous masters, their design and colouring were far superior to the cruder, more garish productions of professional embroiderers; and the accompanying verses, all chosen with impeccable taste from a wide range of literary sources, were executed in black embroidery-silk with such consummate skill that every hook and squiggle, every variation in thickness of line, every join and break in the brush-written 'grass script' calligraphy was exactly reproduced, not mangled and deformed as in the stilted, wooden attempts at copying of the commercial embroiderer.

Since Hui-niang did not depend on her embroidery for a living, specimens of it, despite its great fame, have always been hard to come by. Even among the rich and great there are very few households which can boast a specimen. Such as do exist are referred to by collectors as 'Hui embroidery'. But what are sometimes sold as specimens of 'Hui embroidery' today invariably turn out to be imitations deliberately made to take in the inexpert buyer. The real Hui-niang died tragically at the age of eighteen, and there are in fact no genuine specimens of her work now to be had, since the few houses which posse as a piece or two hold on to them tenaciously and refuse to part with them to would-be purchasers. Indeed, if a genuine specimen of Hui-niang's work *were* ever to come upon the market, its value would be incalculable. The Jia family originally possessed three, of which two had been presented as a gift to the Emperor only a year previously, leaving this set of sixteen little table-screens, to

which Grandmother Jia was so much attached that she kept them always in her own apartment, unwilling that they should remain with the stock of objects commonly drawn on for the family's entertainment of guests, and only rarely, on occasions of her own devising, brought them out to be admired.

Stone

pierced-work back of interlacing dragons, which had been put there for Grandmother *Jia* to lie on. It was furnished with a back-rest and bolsters and was large enough to have a fur rug spread out on it and still leave room at one end for a small, exquisitely gilded table of foreign make on which had been placed a teapot, a teacup, a spittoon, a napkin and, among various other small objects, an eyeglass-case. Grandmother Jia rested with her feet up on the settle and, after talking for a while with the company, took out the eyeglasses from their case and looked through them at the stage.

'I do hope you will forgive me for lying down like this in your presence,' she apologized to Aunt Xue and Mrs Li. 'It's very rude of me, I know, but I'm getting so rheumaticky in my old age?

She made Amber get up on to the settle beside her and massage her legs by gently pounding them with a 'maiden's fist'—a sort of short-handled mallet with a padded leather head.

No feaster's table with cover and drapes had been put in front of the settle, only the little ornamental table with the table-screen and the incense set and vase of flowers. The very elegant, somewhat larger table of normal height which would have been hers if she had been sitting up with the rest had been placed somewhat to the left of the settle and laid with wine-cups, soup-spoons and chopsticks for four. It was occupied by Bao-qin, Xiang-yun**,** Dai-yu and Bao-yu. Although she could not sit with them, Grandmother Jia kept up a pretence that they were eating together: each dish as it arrived would be submitted to her inspection, and if she fancied it, would be placed on the little table at her elbow; then, when she had tasted it, it would be removed and set down in front of the four young people for them to finish.

After Grandmother Jia and her four grandchildren, the next along on the east side was Lady Xing; after her came Lady Wang, then You-shi, then Li Wan, then Xi-feng, and lastly Jia Rong's wife, Hu-shi. Along the west side Bao-chai came first, next to her mother, then Li Wen, then Li Qi, then Xiu-yan, then Ying-chun, then Tan-chun and then Xi-chun.

Red-tasselled glass lanterns hung in rows from the beams overhead to left and right of the diners. In front of them, on each of their tables, was an ingenious light consisting of a flower-shaped candle attached to the base of a reflector in the form of a vertical lotus leaf. These lotus leaves, though made of metal, were so skillfully engraved and enamelled that they looked almost real. They were attached to their metal stands by means of a swivel, so that the beams of the candle could be concentrated in any direction desired. When all the reflectors were simultaneously directed towards the stage, the diners' view of the players was wonderfully improved.

The wooden partitions with their window-lattices and doors which normally separated the hall from the verandah had been removed and great palace lanterns of glass, whose elaborately carved wooden frames were hung with strings of **crimson** tassels, were suspended at intervals in the space thus created. More rows of lanterns—lanterns of every kind of material and design— horn lanterns, glass lanterns, gauze lanterns, lanterns of Yunnan glitter-glass, embroidered ones, painted ones, lanterns with cut-outs of paper or silk in them, hung in lines under the verandah eaves, both inside and outside the architraves, and from the eaves of the loggias on either side of the courtyard.

The tables on the verandah were all occupied by males: Cousin Zhen, Jia Lian, Jia Huan, Jia Cong, Jia Rong, Jia Qin, Jia Yun, Jia Ling and Jia Chang.

Although Grandmother Jia had sent invitations by word of mouth to every clansman and clanswoman residing in

the city, some of them were too elderly to stand up to the noise and excitement of a party, some were unable to come because they had no one to look after the house for them while they were away, some had intended to come but were prevented from doing so by illness, some stayed away from envy of their richer clansmen or because they were ashamed of their own poverty, others because they could not stand Xi-feng, and yet others because they were so unused to company and incapacitated by shyness that they *dared* not come—in short, although the clan was a numerous one, for one reason or another, of all those invited the only female guest who turned up was Lou-shi, mother of Bao-yu's former classmate, the intrepid little Jia Jun, who came bringing Jia Jun with her, and the only male ones were those who had found employment with the family under Xi-feng's auspices and were there-fore obliged to put in an appearance: Jia Qin, Jia Yun, Jia Chang and Jia Ling. Yet even with the absence of so many who had been invited from outside, for a family party the company was a large one.

Presently, while they all sat watching the players, Lin Zhi-xiao's wife came into the hall leading six other women, each pair of whom were carrying between them a small kang-table covered with a **red** felt top on which was a bundle of strung cash: hundreds and hundreds of newly-minted copper coins, specially chosen for size and quality, fastened together by a single long cord of **crimson** silk. Under the direction of Lin Zhi-xiao's wife two of these tables were set down in front of Mrs Li and Aunt Xue and the third one beside Grandmother Jia's settle.

'Do it in the middle, where everyone can see' said Grandmother Jia.

The women all knew what was expected of them. Setting the tables down in the centre of the hall, they simultaneously undid the ends of the **crimson** cords with which the money was fastened and began pulling them out so that the coins tumbled in heaps upon the tables.

The play being performed on this occasion was *The House in Pin-kang Lane*, and the actors had just come to the end of that section of it called 'Meeting in the Sickroom'. The hero Yu Shu-ye, having at last met the love of his life only to be called by stern duty from her side, had just left the stage in chagrin. At this point the child-actor playing the part of his little page Leopard Boy, observing what was going on in the hall, began to extemporize:

'You can go off in a huff if you like; but today is the fifteenth of the first month and did Lady Jia of Rong-guo House is holding a family party; so what lam going to do is to get on this horse and gallop there as quickly as I can and ask them for some sweeties!'

This caused Grandmother Jia and the rest of the audience to burst out laughing.

'That's a sharp little fellow,' said Aunt Xue. 'How sweet!'

'And he's barely nine,' said Xi-feng.

'Barely nine!' said Grandmother Jia. 'And being able to come out with it so pat!'

She nodded in the direction of the waiting women.

'Largesse!'

Three of the women had already provided themselves with small shallow baskets in readiness for this order. At the word of command they walked up to the little tables, shovelled up basketfuls of coins from the heaped-up money, and took them outside to the foot of the stage which Leopard Boy had just vacated.

'Largesse from Lady Jia, Mrs Xue and Mrs Li for Leopard Boy to buy himself some sweets with,' said one of the women.

The three of them then discharged the contents of their baskets upon the stage. The money landed with a mighty clatter and at once the whole stage was covered with shining pennies.

Cousin Then had ordered his own pages to have a large flat basket of money ready for his own largesse to the players.

But you will have to wait for the next volume, gentle reader, in order to find out whether they received it.

CHAPTER 54

Lady Jia ridicules the cliches of romantic fiction
And Wang Xi-feng emulates the filial antics
of Lao Lai-zi

TO CONTINUE OUR STORY:

Cousin Zhen and Jia Lian had secretly instructed their pages to have a large flat-bottomed basket of largesse-money in readiness, and when they heard Grandmother Jia call out 'Largesse!', they told the pages to take this basket and empty it onto the stage. The money showered down on the boards with a tremendous ringing clatter, which greatly delighted the old lady.
The two men now rose to their feet. A page hurried forward and handed jia Lian a silver kettle of freshly-heated wine on a tray. Taking the kettle, Jia Lian followed his cousin into the hall. Cousin Zhen went first to Mrs Li, bowed, took her wine-cup and, turning back, handed it to Jia Lian to fill. Then he did the same for Aunt Xue. The two ladies stood up, meanwhile, politely demurring:
'Please, gentlemen, go back to your seats! You are too polite!'
With the exception of the four senior ladies - Aunt Xue, Mrs Li, Lady Xing and Lady Wang - all the females present now left their seats and stood, hands at their sides, while Cousin Zhen and Jia Lian went over to the couch on which Grandmother Jia reclined. As it was rather a low one, the two men knelt to serve her. The other males, who had followed them into the hall and were standing a little behind them drawn up in their order of seniority, with Jia Cong at their head, seeing Cousin Zhen and jia Lian kneel, knelt down in a row behind them, whereupon Bao-yu hurriedly rose from his chair and knelt down as well. Xiang-yun nudged him, amused.

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'What do you want to kneel down with them for?' she whispered. 'If you're feeling so polite all of a sudden, it would be more to the point to get up and serve everyone your-self.'
'So I shall, presently,' Bao-yu whispered back at her.
The two men had now finished serving Grandmother Jia and gone on to serve Lady Xing and Lady Wang.
'What about the young ladies?' Cousin Zhen inquired when these last two had been attended to.
'No, no, go and sit down now I' Grandmother Jia and the senior ladies cried. 'Spare them the formality.'
At this Cousin Zhen and the other males withdrew.
It was now about ten o'clock and the play being performed
- the 'Feast of Lanterns' section from *The Orphan's Revenge* -had reached a climax of noise and excitement. Bao-yu tried to slip out unnoticed under cover of the din, but his grand-mother had spotted him.
'Where are you going?' she called. 'There are a lot of fireworks about outside. Mind a piece of burning touch-paper doesn't fall on you and set you alight!'
'I'm not going very far,' said Bao-yu. 'I'll be back directly.'
Grandmother Jia ordered some of the old nannies present to go after him and see that he was all right. Observing that he had only Musk and Ripple and a couple of little junior maids in attendance, she asked what had become of Aroma.
'That girl is getting above herself,' she said. 'Sending the younger maids to stand in for her! - What next?'
Lady Wang rose hastily in Aroma's defence.
'It is only a few days since her mother died. She is still in mourning for her mother. It wouldn't be right for her to go out in company yet.'
Grandmother Jia nodded, but seemed to have second thoughts:
'That's all very well, but bereavement shouldn't make any difference where a master or mistress is concerned. Suppose she had still been working for me: do you think she would have stayed away then? One doesn't want this sort of thing to become a precedent.'
Xi-feng came to her aunt's assistance:

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‘Even if she weren’t in mourning, she would still need to be keeping an eye on things. Tonight, with lanterns and fire-works everywhere, there is a terrible danger of fire. Whenever we have plays, the people from the Garden all come sneaking over here to watch. It’s just as well to have one careful person like Aroma left behind there who can go round making sure that everything is all right. Besides, she’ll be able to see that everything is ready for Bao-yu so that he can go straight to bed when he gets back. If she were here, you can be sure that no one else would bother. He would go back to find his bedding cold, and there would be no hot water for his tea or anything else ready for him. I’m afraid I took it for granted that you would prefer her not to come; but if you want her here, Grannie, I can easily go and fetch her for you.’
‘No, no, don’t fetch her,’ said Grandmother Jia hurriedly. ‘You have obviously given the matter more thought than I. There’s only one thing, though. When did her mother die? Why didn’t I get to hear about it?’
‘But Aroma came to tell you about it herself,’ said Xi-feng, smiling. ‘Surely you can’t have forgotten already?’
Grandmother Jia thought for a bit.
‘Yes, I do seem to remember something about it. I’m afraid my memory isn’t up to much these days.’
‘You can’t remember *everything’* the others said reassuringly.
Grandmother Jia sighed:
‘She served me all those years when she was a little girl, then she was with Yun for a while, and during these past few years she’s had that holy terror who left a moment ago to put up with. I remember thinking at the time that we *owe* the girl *a* bit of kindness - especially as she’s not one of our own home-reared servants but one who came to us from outside - and meaning to ask them to give her something towards the funeral when I heard that her mother had died, but I’m afraid that afterwards I forgot.’
‘It’s already been taken care of,’ said Xi-feng. ‘Lady Wang gave her forty taels for funeral expenses the other day.’
Grandmother Jia nodded:
‘Ah well, that’s all right then. As a matter of fact Faithful lost her mother too, quite recently. I couldn’t let *her* go to the

funeral because her parents. were living in the South. Since she and Aroma are both in mourning, why don’t we let her go and join Aroma? The two of them can keep each other company.’
She ordered some of the women in attendance to make a selection of the cakes and other delicacies they had been eating and take them for Faithful to eat with Aroma in **Green** Delights.
‘You’re a bit late with your suggestion,’ said Amber, laughing. ‘Faithful went over to Aroma’s place hours ago!’
This remark concluded the discussion and the company’s briefly distracted attention returned now to the business of drinking and watching the play.

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After leaving the party, Bao-yu made his way straight through to the Garden. The old women whom his grandmother had sent after him, realizing that he must be returning to his own apartment, did not accompany him inside but slipped into the tea-kitchen of the gatehouse to warm themselves at the stove and avail themselves of the opportunity for some surreptitious drinking and a hand or two of cards.
On entering his courtyard Bao-yu found **Green** Delights ablaze with lights but silent as the grave.
‘Surely they can’t all have gone to bed?’ said Musk. ‘Let’s go in quietly and make them jump.’
Bao-yu and the four girls tiptoed through the outer room and peeped through the apertures of the mirror-wall into the room within. Aroma and another girl were lying facing each other on the nearer side of the kang. At the further end two or three old women appeared to be taking a nap. Bao-yu was just about to push open the mirror-door and enter when the sound of a sigh came from the direction of the kang and he could hear the voice of Faithful speaking:
‘You see, you can never be sure of anything in this life. Look at you, f6r example, on your own here with a free family living outside, never sure from one year to the next where they might move to: you never expected to be with your mother at the end, did you? Yet it just so happened that

this year she was living near at hand and you were able to be a good daughter to her when she died.’
‘It’s true,’ said Aroma. ‘When I first came here, I didn’t think I’d ever see my mother again. And do you know, when I went to tell Her Ladyship that she’d passed away, she gave me forty taels for funeral expenses. She couldn’t have done more for me if I’d been her own daughter. It’s certainly more than *I’d* have dared hope for.’
Bao-yu turned back and whispered to Musk and the others behind him:
‘It’s Faithful in there with her. I didn’t think *she’d* be here. If I go inside now, she’s sure to rush off in a huff - she always does nowadays when she sees me. We’d better go away again and leave the two of them in peace. Aroma must have been pretty miserable on her own. It’s nice that she’s got Faithful with her to talk to.’

He tiptoed out again and taking his stand behind a rock, began hitching up his clothes. Musk and Ripple, who were standing behind him, suppressed a giggle:
'Why don't you squat down to take off your underthings? You'll get the wind on your belly, standing up like that!'
The two junior maids who had been following behind Musk and Ripple, as soon as they saw the reason for the halt, hurried off to the tea-kitchen for hot water to wash his hands.
Bao-yu had finished and was just turning back to the waiting maids when two womenservants appeared, walking in his direction. Seeing this dark figure lurking amongst the rocks, they loudly demanded who it was.
'It's Bao-yu,' said Ripple. 'Don't shout at him like that, you'll scare the daylights out of him!'
'Oh I *am* sorry,' said the woman who had shouted. 'What an awful thing to do - and today of all days! How are you, young ladies? Having a nice holiday? You certainly deserve it, after all your work during the rest of the year.'
As they came closer, Musk asked them what they were carrying.
'It's some things from Her Old Ladyship for Miss Faithful and Miss Aroma,' said the woman. 'She suddenly thought of them, while she was watching the play.'

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'Oh?' said Ripple. 'I thought it was *The Orphan's Revenge* they were watching, not *The Magic Casket!*'
'Take the lids off and let's have a look,' said Bao-yu.
The two women squatted on their haunches and held out the food-boxes while Musk and Ripple took off the lids. Bao- yu leaned over and looked into them. Each one contained a selection of the very choicest of the various sweet and savoury confections they had been eating at the party. He nodded approvingly before hurrying on. Musk and Ripple threw down the lids - somewhat carelessly - and hurried after him.
'Now those two women seemed very nice,' said Bao-yu. 'They were certainly very civil. Think how hard *they* must work every day, Yet they could still say those nice things about you - none of that boasting about how busy they are and how much they do for us that you get from some of these people.'
'Oh, those two are all right,' said Musk. 'Some of them are really terrible, though.'
'They can't *he/p* being stupid,' said Bao-yu. 'Being more intelligent than they are, you ought to feel sorry for them. You only have to be a bit more forebearing with them and they'd give you no trouble.'
While he was speaking, they were passing through the gateway of the Garden. The old women drinking and playing cards in the tea-kitchen had been taking it in turns to get up and peep outside so as not to be taken off their guard, and seeing Bao-yu through the gate, they came hurrying out after him.
In the gallery leading to the hall where the party was he came upon the two little maids who had gone to fetch hot water. They had been waiting there for some time, one with a basin of water, the other with a towel over her arm and a pot of hand lotion. Ripple first tested the water with her hand.
'The older you grow the more stupid you get,' she said to the girl. 'This water is stone cold.'
'Blame the weather, miss,' said the girl. 'I was afraid the water would cool quickly so I poured it out boiling from the kettle, but you see it makes no difference.'
Just at that moment an old woman chanced to be passing by with a kettle full of freshly-boiled water.

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'Here, missus,' the girl with the basin called after her, 'do us a favour! Come over and pour some in this basin, will you?'
'This is for Her Old Ladyship's tea,' said the old woman. 'Go and get some yourself, young lady - walking won't spoil

your feet!'

'I don't care who it's for,' said Ripple, 'but if you won't pour that water out for her, I shall come and do it myself.'
The old woman turned. Recognizing Ripple, she hurriedly lifted the kettle up and poured some water into the basin.
'That's enough,' said Ripple. 'Really, a person of your age ought to have more sense! We know it's Her Old Ladyship's. Do you suppose we'd have dared ask for it if we weren't entitled to?'
The old woman smiled apologetically:
'My eyesight's not too good. I didn't recognize this young lady as one of yours.'
When Bao-yu had finished washing, the other girl poured some of the lotion onto his palm and he rubbed it into his hands. Ripple and Musk took advantage of the hot water to wash their own hands too, and after rubbing a little of the lotion into them, followed Bao-yu back into the hall.
Calling for a kettle of warm wine, Bao-yu now took his turn at pouring for the ladies, beginning with Mrs Li and Aunt Xue. They protested smilingly and begged him to go back to his seat, but Grandmother Jia insisted that he should pour for them.
'He's young,' she said. 'Let him do it. But let us empty our cups first for this round.'
She drained her winecup as she said this. Lady Xing and Lady Wang followed suit and the other two ladies felt

constrained to imitate their example.
‘Pour Out for the girls too,’ said Grandmother Jia. ‘And do it properly. See that they empty their cups first before you fill them.’
‘Yes, Grandma,’ said Bao-yu, and proceeded from table to table, pouring for everyone in turn. When he got to Dai-yu

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he hesitated, knowing that for her this sort of drinking was an impossibility; but Dai-yu held her cup up to his lips and he drained its contents for her at a gulp.
‘Thank you,’ she said, smiling gratefully. Bao-yu refilled the winecup.
‘Don’t go drinking cold wine, Bao-yu,’ Xi-feng called out to him. ‘It’ll make your hand shake. You won’t be able to write properly or draw a straight bow.’
‘I haven’t been drinking cold wine,’ said Bao-yu.
‘I know, I know,’ said Xi-feng gaily. ‘I was only joking.’
When Bao-yu had finished pouring out for all the girls -all, that is, except Jia Rong’s wife Hu-shi, who, being of a generation below his, had to have her drink poured out for her by a maid - he went onto the verandah outside and poured for Cousin Zhen and the men. Having done so, he sat and chatted with them for a while before going back into the hall and resuming his seat with the ladies.
Presently soup was served and, shortly after, little First Moon dumplings of sweetened rice-flour. Grandmother Jia expressed concern for the boy-actors outside in the cold:
‘Tell them to break off for a bit, poor little things! Let them have some hot soup and some good hot food to eat before they go on again. They can have some of these cakes and things, and some of these dumplings.’
A few minutes later, the stage in the courtyard having by now fallen silent, two blind female ballad-singers, both of them familiar visitors to the house, were led in by the women. A couple of high stools were placed behind them, on which Grandmother Jia invited them to be seated, and their instruments were handed to them, a *pipa* lute and a three-stringed ‘samisen’ guitar. Grandmother Jia asked Mrs Li and Aunt Xue what story they would like to hear.
‘Anything,’ they said.
Grandmother Jia turned to the two women:
‘Have you added anything new to your repertoire lately?’
‘Yes,’ said one of the women. ‘We’ve got a new story set in the Five Dynasties period, after the fall of Tang.’
‘What’s it called?’ Grandmother Jia asked her.
‘It’s called *The Phoenix Seeks a Mate*,’ said the woman.

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‘Well, the name sounds all right,’ said Grandmother Jia. ‘Can you give us an idea what it’s about, then we can decide whether we want to hear it or not?’
‘This story took place in the time of the Five Dynasties after the decline of the Tang,’ said the woman. ‘There was in those days a certain gentleman called Wang Zhong who, after having served as Chief Minister under two successive reigns, had retired because of old age to live on his estate in the country. Now this Wang zhong had an only son whose name was Wang Xi-feng -’
This set everyone laughing.
‘Feng’s double, evidently,’ said Grandmother Jia.
One of the womenservants gave the blind ballad-singer a prod:
‘Don’t talk such nonsense! That’s our Mrs Lian’s name.’
‘Carry on, carry on!’ said Grandmother Jia.
The blind woman rose to her feet:
‘I’m dreadfully sorry, Mrs Lian. I had really no idea it was your name.’
‘Do carry on,’ said Xi-feng, laughing. ‘That’s quite all right. Coincidences over names are the commonest thing in the world.’
The woman sat down again and continued:
‘A time came when this old Sir Wang sent his son off to the capital to sit for the examinations. One day, while the young man was on his journey, there was a great downpour of rain and he was forced to seek shelter in a near-by grange. Now it so happened that the owner of this grange was a former acquaintance of old Sir Wang’s called Li, and this old Sir Li invited the young man to spend a few days with him at the grange, accommodating him in his own study. Sir Li had no son of his own, but he had an only daughter called Chuluan, a very accomplished young lady who excelled in everything she turned her hand to, whether it was performing on the *qin* or playing Go or painting or calligraphy -’
‘I can see why it’s called *The Phoenix Seeks a Mate*,’ said Grandmother Jia. ‘You don’t need to tell me what the story’s about, I can guess already. “Feng” means “phoenix” and “Chu-luan” means “little hen phoenix”. Obviously it’s the

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story of how Wang Xi-feng seeks to make this Li Chu-luan his wife.'
'I believe Your Old Ladyship has heard this story before,' said the blind woman, smiling.
'Her Old Ladyship has heard everything,' someone told her. 'And what she hasn't heard she can guess.'
'These stories are all the same,' said Grandmother Jia,' so tedious! Always the same ideally eligible young bachelors and the same ideally beautiful and accomplished young ladies -at least, they are *supposed* to be ideal, but there's certainly nothing ideal about their behaviour - in fact there's nothing very ladylike about them at all. Invariably, we are told how well-born they are. Their father has been a Prime Minister, or a First Secretary at the very least. They are always their father's only child and the apple of his eye. They are always amazingly well-educated, a model of decorum, a regular paragon of all the virtues - that is, until the first presentable young man comes along. As soon as *he* appears on the scene -it doesn't matter who or what he is - all their book-learning and the duty they owe their parents fly out of the window and the next moment they are "making their plans for the future" and generally carrying on in a way that would bring blushes to the cheek of a cat-burglar - certainly not in the least like respectable, educated young ladies. You would hardly call a young woman who conducted herself like that a "paragon", however many books she might have read - any more than you would acquit a young fellow charged with highway robbery on the grounds that he was a good scholar. The people who make up these stories give themselves the lie every time they open their mouths.
'And for another thing: if these young women really belonged to cultivated, aristocratic households in which the girls and their mothers were all educated people, then even allowing for the somewhat reduced circumstances owing to their father's early retirement, you can be sure there would still be plenty of nannies and maids in attendance on them. So how is it that in all of these stories there is only ever a single confidante who knows what her young mistress is getting up to? What are all the other servants supposed to be

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doing all this time? Of course, this is only another example of the way in which these stories contradict themselves.'

There was some laughter from the assembled company and someone complimented Grandmother Jia on her perceptiveness in exposing the underlying falseness of these stories.
'There's always a reason for it,' the old lady went on. 'In some cases it's because the writer is envious of people so much better off than himself, or disappointed because he has tried to obtain their patronage and failed, and deliberately portrays them in this unfavourable light as a means of getting his own back on them. In other cases the writers have been corrupted by reading this sort of stuff before they begin to write any themselves, and, though totally ignorant of what life in educated, aristocratic families is really like, portray their heroines in this way simply because everyone else does so and they think it will please their readers. I ask you now, never mind *very* grand families like the ones they pretend to be writing about, even in average well-to-do families like ours when do you ever hear of such carryings-on? It's a wonder their jaws don't drop off, telling such dreadful lies! For my part, *I* have never allowed these sort of stories to be told. Even the maids here don't know about such matters. It's true that during the past year or two, since I've been getting older, and particularly now that the young people are most of the time safely out of the way in the Garden, I *do* once in a while listen to a snatch or two of one of these stories, when I feel in need of cheering up a bit; but as soon as the children arrive, I make the person telling it stop.'
Mesdames Li and Xue were thoroughly in agreement:
'That is the general rule in all the best people's houses. Even in our households the children aren't allowed to listen to such stories.'
Xi-feng walked over to pour the old lady a drink:
'Come on, Grannie, that's enough! Your wine will be getting cold. Drink this first to wet your whistle. You can go on with your lecture afterwards.'
She turned to the rest of the company:
'The story you've just been listening to is called *Falsehood Exposed*, or *The Tale of a Grandmother*. It is a story which took

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place under the reigning dynasty, on this very day of this very month of this very year on this very spot and at this very hour. How can Grannie "with one mouth tell a double tale"? Ah, how indeed! Our tale puts forth two tails. Which tail to wag? Wig-wag. But for the time being we do not inquire which tale is false, which true. Our story turns rather to those people in the party who were admiring the lanterns and watching the play... Just give these two kinsfolk a chance to drink a cup of wine and watch a scene or two more of the play, Grannie, and then you can get on with your *Exposure of Falsehood* -dynasty by dynasty.'
She continued unconcernedly pouring wine while her audience convulsed themselves. Even the blind ballad-singers were in stitches.
'You've got the gift, Mrs Lian,' they said. 'It's what we call a "hard mouth". If you were to take up story-telling as a profession, we should be out of business!'

‘Don’t let them encourage you,’ said Aunt Xue to Xi-feng, laughing. ‘You must behave yourself. There are people outside listening. This isn’t like every day, you know.’
‘It’s only Cousin Zhen outside there,’ said Xi-feng. ‘He and I used to get up to all sorts of mischief together in our younger days. It’s only during the last few years since I’ve grown up and married Lian that I’ve had to start being a bit more strait-laced with him. But even though we have to treat each other like solemn in-laws nowadays, I’m sure he doesn’t mind me fooling about like this. Think of Lao Lai-zi in the Twenty-Four Patterns of Filial Piety, dressing up in children’s clothes at the age of seventy and playing at “dicky-bird” in front of his aged parents to keep them amused. If Cousin Zhen and the other menfolk won’t come in here and play dicky-bird themselves, the fact that *I’m* taking so much trouble to make Grannie laugh and get her to eat a bit should make them feel pleased and grateful, not critical of my behaviour.’
‘It’s true, I haven’t had a really good laugh for days,’ said Grandmother Jia. ‘She has made me laugh so much, I really do feel better for it. I think I’ll have another drop of wine.

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She took a sip from her cup and then turned to address
Bao-yu:
‘Pour a cup for your Cousin Feng.’
‘No need,’ said Xi-feng. ‘Let me share your good health.’ She took the cup that Grandmother Jia had just been drinking from and tossed back what remained of the wine in it, then, handing the cup to a maid to take away, she replaced it with a clean one that had been previously warmed in hot water. She then proceeded to do the same for everyone else, removing their dirty cups and replacing them with clean, warmed ones. After that she poured out a fresh supply of wine for everyone before returning to her seat.
‘If Your Old Ladyship doesn’t want to hear a story,’ said the blind woman who had spoken before, ‘perhaps you’d like us to do a song for you.’
‘Give us “O Captain, Captain”,’ said Grandmother Jia.
The two women at once began tuning their instruments and presently struck up a lively tune, the words of which were divided alternately between them.
Grandmother Jia inquired what the time was.
‘Midnight,’ said one of the senior womenservants.
‘No wonder it’s getting so cold,’ said Grandmother Jia. ‘It really is bitter.’
Maids were already arriving with more clothes, which they helped their mistresses to change into or put on over what they were already wearing.
Lady Wang rose, smiling, to her feet:
‘Why don’t you go into the room at the back, Mother, where the heated kang is? Mrs Li and my sister are not outsiders; I’m sure they won’t mind. And the rest of us will take care of them for you.’
‘Why don’t we all go inside?’ said Grandmother Jia. ‘That will be much cosier.’
‘I doubt there’s room for us all,’ said Lady Wang.
‘I’ll tell you what,’ said Grandmother Jia. ‘We don’t need all these tables now. Why don’t we have just two or three of them taken inside? We can have them put together to make one big table, then we can all squeeze up round it and keep each other warm. That will be much jollier!’

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Everyone agreed that this was a good idea and got up from their places in preparation for the move. The tables were cleared, the three largest ones were carried into the inner room and put together, and the dessert, with various additions and replacements, was relaid on them inside.
‘Now,’ said Grandmother Jia when everybody was inside, ‘you must forget about seniority now and sit down where I put you.’
She made Mrs Li and Mrs Xue sit at one end, facing south, and placed herself close to them on the east side, with Xiangyun squeezed in on one side of her and Dai-yu and Bao-qin on the other.
‘*You* must sit next to your mother,’ she told Bao-yu. So Lady Xing and Lady Wang came next on the east side with Bao-yu sandwiched between them.
She put Bao-chai on the west side at the end nearest to Mrs Li, then came the Three Springs, then Lou-shi with her little boy Jia Jun, then Li Wan and You-shi with little Jia Lan squeezed in between them, and finally Xi-feng. Jia Rong’s wife, Hu-shi, sat on her own at the north end, round the corner from Xi-feng.
When they were all seated, Grandmother Jia called to Cousin Zhen and the menfolk to leave, saying that she herself would shortly be going off to bed. Hearing her call, Cousin Zhen came hurrying inside, bringing the others with him.
‘Go away, go away!’ said Grandmother Jia. ‘Don’t come in here! They’ve only just sat down, they don’t want to have to all get up again. Off to bed with you! You’ve got important things to do in the morning.’
‘Very good,’ said Cousin Zhen. ‘I’ll leave Rong behind then, to pour the drinks for you.’
‘Ah yes,’ said Grandmother Jia. ‘I’d forgotten him.’
Cousin Zhen and Jia Lian withdrew. Pleased to be so soon released, they arranged for Jia Cong and Jia Huan to be escorted back to their own apartments and went off, as they had planned to do if possible, to spend the rest of

the night together on the town. But that is no part of our story.
'I was just thinking,' said Grandmother Jia when they had gone, ' all these people enjoying themselves here tonight:

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all we lacked was a young married couple to make it seem like a proper reunion. I was forgetting about Rong. Sit next to your wife, Rong. Let's see you both together.'

Just then some of the women came in bringing a playbill with them. The players were preparing to resume.
'Oh, just as we were beginning to enjoy a little conversation,' said Grandmother Jia. 'Now we shan't be able to hear ourselves speak. And those poor children must be getting dreadfully cold after so many hours in the open. Why don't we give them a rest? Call our own troupe over and let t*hem* do something on this stage. The other ones can stay here and watch them.'
With answering cries the women went out to make the necessary arrangements. Messengers were sent, some into Prospect Garden to summon the young actresses, others to the inner gate to requisition some pages. When the pages presented themselves at the **green**-room door they were told to take away all the grown-up members of the visiting troupe and entertain them elsewhere so that only the boy-actors should be present when the little actresses arrived. These last were to be observed shortly afterwards, issuing from the gallery at the corner entrance to the courtyard, preceded by their chief singing instructor and accompanied by a number of women carrying bundles. There had not been time to bring the wardrobe-boxes, so they had had to make a guess at the three or four plays that Grandmother Jia was likeliest to want to hear and hurriedly bundle together the costumes that would be needed for their performance.
Led by the women who had summoned them, Elegante and the rest entered the heated back room of the hall, made their curtsies to Grandmother Jia and the rest of the company, and then stood, arms held stiffly at their sides, awaiting instructions.
Grandmother Jia smiled at them benevolently:
'Doesn't your teacher give you a holiday even for First Moon? Dear, dear, dear! - Well now, what are you going to sing for us? We've just been listening to *The Orphan's Revenge* which was so noisy that it's given us all headaches. We'd like to hear something a bit quieter now. I ought to tell you that

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we have a very discriminating audience here tonight. There's Mrs Xue and Mrs Li here who both come from families which used to keep their own troupes of players and who have heard heaven knows how many good performances between them; there are some young ladies here who know much more than our own girls about plays and music; and the troupe you saw just now outside, though they are only children, belong to a famous conn9isseur and are better than many commercial companies of grown-up players. So if we don't want to disgrace ourselves, we shall have to be on our best. Now let's see. Let's try to think of something a bit different to show them. Suppose we get Parfumee to sing "The Dream Recalled" from *The Return of the Soul* with just a fiddle to accompany her - leaving out all the woodwind. How would that be for a start?'
'Just the thing, Your Old Ladyship,' said Elegante drily. We're certainly not good enough for Mrs Xue and Mrs Li to want to see us in full performance. They just want an idea of what our diction and voice-production are like.'
'Quite so,' said Grandmother Jia.
The two ladies referred to were much diverted by Elegante's reply.
'I believe you and Her Old Ladyship are pulling our legs,' they told her.
'Not at all,' said Grandmother Jia. 'These girls are trained only for our own private amusement, not as an investment. We don't hire them out**,** like some people. So they really aren't up to commercial standards.'
She turned to Althee, the performer of 'painted face' parts:
'You can do "Hui-ming Takes the Letter" from *The Western Chamber*. Don't bother to make up for it, though. I think those two scenes should be enough to give our guests some idea of what you can do. Put all you've got into it, now, or I shall have something to say to you!'
The little actresses went out. Those who were to play had soon got into their costumes and the performance began:

first 'The Dream Recalled' and then 'Taking the Letter'. The audience listened throughout with rapt attention. When the performance had ended, Aunt Xue observed that, though she had seen hundreds of different companies in her time, she had

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never before heard a performance in which the woodwind in the orchestra was silent.

'Oh yes,' said Grandmother Jia. 'Take that "Chu River" aria the heroine sings in *The House in Ping-kang Lane* that we were listening to earlier in the evening. Quite often you can see productions which leave out the woodwind parts in the orchestral accompaniment. Instead they have the male lead playing a flute accompaniment on the stage. I agree, a whole sequence with only string accompaniment is unusual, but there's nothing very special about it. It depends entirely on the individual preference of the person who owns the troupe.'

She pointed to Xiang-yun:

'When I was this child's age her grandfather had a troupe of young actresses one of whom was a very good *qin*-player. She took a number of *qin*-playing scenes like the famous one from *The Western Chamber* and the scene in which Miao-chang plays the *qin* in *The Jade Hairpin* and the "Eighteen Stanzas for the Barbarian Pipe" from the modern sequel to *The Story of the Lute*, and arranged them in a single sequence with *qin* accompaniment. That *was* rather impressive. More what-shall-I-say than the things we have just been listening to.,

'Yes,' the others agreed, 'that does sound most unusual.'

Grandmother Jia called the women over and told them that she would now like Elegante and the others to perform an instrumental piece called *Lantern Festival Moon*. The women went out again to transmit her order. Meanwhile Jia Rong and his wife went round replenishing the winecups.

Xi-feng observed that Grandmother Jia was in very good spirits.

'While the ballad-singers are still here,' she said, 'why don't we get them to play "Spring Joy on Every Brow" for us and we can have a game of "Pass the Plum"?'

'Oh yes, that's a good game,' said Grandmother Jia. 'Just right for this time of year, too.'

Orders were given for a pair of drums to be fetched - special 'drinker's drums' whose black lacquered sides were studded with patterns of brass nails - and handed to the blind women. Someone produced a flowering spray of **red** plum for the game.

'Now,' said Grandmother Jia, 'whoever's hand the branch

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is in when the drumming stops must first drink a cup of wine and then they have to say something: but what shall it be?'

'You can turn your hand to anything, Grannie,' said Xi-feng, 'but for those of us who aren't so clever it won't be much fun if it's something that we're no good at. I think it should be something that *all* of us can enjoy. Why not say that whoever the branch stops with must tell a joke?'

Everyone present knew that Xi-feng was a wonderful raconteuse with a seemingly inexhaustible stock of new and funny stories. The servants standing below in attendance seemed quite as much delighted by this proposal as the members of the family sitting around the table on the kang, and several little maids went racing off to inform sisters or cousins outside:

'Quick, come inside! Mrs Lian is going to tell a joke.'

In no time at all the room was packed with maids.

The actresses had by now finished playing. Grandmother Jia, after first seeing to it that they were given some soup and a selection of the delicacies available, gave orders for the drumming to begin.

The blind women were practised performers in this game and deliberately varied the speed of the beat. Sometimes it would be as slow as the last drips of a water-clock, sometimes as fast as the rattle of dried beans poured from a bag, sometimes it would go galloping along like a runaway horse, sometimes it became a soft whisper interspersed with sudden bursts of sound to make you jump, like flashes of lightning in the darkness. When the beat was slow, the branch passed slowly from hand to hand; when it was hurried, the passing too grew faster. Then suddenly it stopped altogether while Grandmother Jia was holding it. This, in itself, was enough to make everyone laugh. Jia Rong quickly came round and filled up the old lady's winecup.

'Naturally Grandma is the lucky first,' the others said. 'You must let us share your luck, Grandma!'

'The wine is no problem,' said Grandmother Jia. 'It's the joke that's worrying me.'

'Come now, your jokes are better even than Feng's, Grandma,' they said. 'Do tell us one. Make us all laugh.'

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'I don't know any good new ones,' said Grandmother Jia. 'I'll just have to put a bold face on it and do the best I can.'

She began her story.

'In a certain family there were ten sons, all of whom were married, but of the girls they married only one, the youngest, was intelligent and nimble-witted and a good talker. The old couple doted on this clever daughter-in4aw and day in day out found fault with the other nine. The other nine naturally resented this and took counsel together what they should do about it.

"'At heart we are every bit as dutiful as she is," they said, "but because the little wretch is so glib, father-in-law

and mother-in-law only care for her. Isn't there *anything* we can do about this injustice?"
'Then one of the nine had an idea:
"'Why don't we go to the temple of Yama, the King of the Underworld, and ask him why, when our souls first went into human bodies, he gave that little horror a clever tongue and made all the rest of us so stupid?"
'The others were delighted with this suggestion, and so next day they all went trooping off to the temple of King Yama and, after offering up incense, lay down on the steps of the altar and went to sleep. When they were asleep, the souls of the nine sisters-in-law waited and waited and waited, but King Yama didn't come.
'Presently, just as they were growing desperate, Monkey came bowling along on his cloud-trapeze, and seeing the nine souls there, lifted up his metal-clasped cudgel to strike them with. The souls knelt down in terror and begged him to spare them. Monkey asked them what they were doing there, so they told him their story. When they had finished, Monkey stamped his foot and sighed sympathetically.
"'What a good job you met me here and not old Yama," he said. "*He* wouldn't have been able to help you at all."
'The nine souls implored him to tell them what they should do.
"'Do but have compassion on us, Great Sage," they said, "and our troubles will be over."
"'It's quite simple," said Monkey with a laugh. "The day

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that the ten of you were due to enter your human bodies, I happened to have been around at old Yama's place and done a little piddle on the floor, and just before she was born, that little sister-in-law of yours drank it all up. That's what gave her such a clever tongue. If clever tongues are all you want, I can do as much piddle for you as you like."'

The story ended amidst laughter.

'It's a good job all of *us* are such stupid, tongue-tied creatures,' said Xi-feng. 'I should hate to think that any of *us* had drunk monkey's piddle!'

You-shi and Lou-shi turned towards Li Wan, laughing:

'I wonder who she thinks she's fooling. It's very clear which of us in this room is the one who drank monkey's piddle!'

'A joke is always the better for being apt,' Aunt Xue observed.

While she was speaking, the drumming began again. The maids, who wanted only to hear Wang Xi-feng tell a joke, had come to a secret understanding with the blind women that if one of them coughed it would be a signal to stop, and when the branch had been round twice and had just reached Xi-feng for the second time, the maids all coughed and the drumming stopped. There was a shout of laughter from all present.

'Ha!' they said. 'Now we've got you! Hurry up with your wine and tell us a good one - only don't make us laugh so much that we get stomach-ache!'

Xi-feng thought for a few moments and then started:

'A family was celebrating the First Moon festival, just as we are doing, admiring the lanterns and drinking wine together. It was a very lively party and everyone in the family was there: the grandmother, the great-grandmother, the daughters-in-law, the granddaughters-in-law, the greatgranddaughters-in-law, the grandsons, the great-nephews, the great-grandsons, the great-great-grandsons, the great-little-medium-grandsons, the granddaughters, the great-nieces, the first cousins once removed, the first cousins twice removed, the second cousins two-and-a-half times removed - oh, goodness gracious me, it was a really lively party! -'

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Her audience were already laughing.
'She's a caution!' they said. 'I wonder which of us she's got it in for this time.'
'Don't you bring *me* into it,' said You-shi, laughing: 'I'll tear your mouth for you!'
Xi-feng stood up and struck her hands together in mock despair:
'Here am I going to all this trouble to entertain you and all you do is keep interrupting. All right then, I won't go on.'
'Go on, go on! Take no notice of them!' said Grandmother Jia. 'What happened then?'
'What happened then?' said Xi-feng. 'Oh, there they all sat, and after drinking together all night long, they went to bed.'
She said this straight-faced and in a very matter-of-fact tone of voice. Her audience waited open-mouthed for her to continue, but nothing was forthcoming, and at last they realized, with a chill of disappointment, that that was all they were going to hear. After a long, old-fashioned look from Shi Xiang-yun she relented, however.
'All right, let me tell you another story about people celebrating the First Moon festival.
'Some men were taking an enormous rocket outside the city and a crowd of thousands had collected behind them to see them let it off. While they were still on their way, some impatient character who couldn't bear to wait any longer put a lighted incense-stick to the touch-paper and lit the fuse. There was a great **WHOOSH!** and the rocket went off. Everyone burst out laughing and went off home - all except the man who had been underneath, carrying the rocket on his back. He just stood there all on his own, complaining what a rotten job the firework-maker had made of the rocket. He'd put it together so badly, he said, that all the gunpowder had trickled away before they'd had a chance to let it off.'

‘But surely he’d have *heard* it go off?’ said Xiang-yun.
‘He was stone deaf,’ said Xi-feng.
There was a burst of laughter from her audience. But they were still worried about her earlier story.
‘What about the other one you were telling? What *did* happen then? You really ought to finish it, you know.’

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‘Oh how you do pester one!’ said Xi-feng, thumping the table in pretended annoyance. ‘Next day was the sixteenth; the party was over; the festival had ended. If you ask me, I think they were too busy clearing up and putting things away to *know* what had happened then.’

This brought another burst of laughter.
‘That’s two o’clock sounding outside,’ said Xi-feng. ‘I’m sure Grannie must be tired. If you ask me, I think we all ought to be like the deaf man’s firework and “trickle away
You-shi, who in the vehemence of her mirth was rocking back and forth with a handkerchief stuffed in her mouth, stopped for a moment to point a minatory finger at Xi-feng:
‘She really is a caution, this one!’
‘She’s a caution all right, and no mistake!’ said Grandmother Jia. ‘By the way, talking of fireworks, why don’t we let *ours* off now? They will help us to overcome the effects of all that wine.’
At once Jia Rong jumped up and hurried out. Under his supervision a team of pages set up a number of framework stands in the courtyard on which fireworks were then fastened or hung. Though none of them particularly large ones, they were all imported tribute fireworks of the very highest quality. There were fireworks of all sorts, including a number of bangers. Dai-yu, being of a nervous disposition, was terrified of pops and bangs. Knowing this, Grandmother Jia hugged her to her bosom to comfort her. Aunt Xue offered the same protection to Xiang-yun, but Xiang-yun laughed and said that she didn’t mind the fireworks.
‘There’s nothing she likes better than letting them off herself,’ said Bao-chai. *‘She’s* not afraid of fireworks!’
Lady Wang hugged Bao-yu.
‘What about me?’ said Xi-feng. ‘Doesn’t anyone love me?’
‘I’ll hold you,’ said You-shi, laughing, ‘ though why you should act the shrinking young thing *now* I can’t imagine. Normally when you hear fireworks you get so excited I’d sooner eat a bee’s turd than stand by and watch you!’
‘Wait until this is over,’ said Xi-feng. ‘We’ll go out in the courtyard and let some off ourselves. I’m sure I can do it better than these boys.’

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While they were speaking, a succession of different sorts of fireworks were going off outside: golden rain, ‘nine dragon’ rockets, thunderflashes, cloud-hoppers, and many other sorts. When the display was over, the boy-actors were asked to go up on the stage again and play the Beggar’s Song, and everyone amused themselves by throwing money onto the stage and watching them scramble for it.

As hot soup was once more being served, Grandmother Jia remarked that after being up for so many hours she was beginning to feel rather empty.

‘We have some duck and rice stew ready,’ Xi-feng told her.

‘I think I’d like something a bit lighter than that,’ said Grandmother Jia.

‘We’ve got a rice and date frumenty that was made for the ladies who don’t eat meat,’ said Xi-feng.

‘That will do,’ said Grandmother Jia.

The used things were removed now from the table and another set of dishes containing all sorts of tempting entremets laid out in their place. When everyone had sampled what they fancied, they rinsed their mouths out with tea supplied for that purpose and the party finally broke up.

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Early on the morning of the seventeenth the family paid a formal visit to the Ning-guo mansion to attend the ceremonial closing of the Hall of Ancestors and the taking down and putting away of the ancestral portraits. Later in that day, when they were back at Rong-guo House, they attended a New Year reception by Aunt Xue.

There was no question of another Visitation that year. A Dowager Consort, who had been the late Emperor’s favourite concubine, had fallen seriously ill and the filial feelings of the reigning Emperor had prompted him to curtail all seasonal festivities at the Palace. So from Yuan-chun that year there was not so much as a lantern riddle.

There was, however, during the days which followed, a succession of parties or ‘receptions’ given by the senior domestics of the household, to which the family were, of course, invited: Lai Da’s on the eighteenth, Lai Sheng’s at the

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Ning-guo mansion on the nineteenth, Lin Zhi-xiao's on the twentieth, Widow Shan's on the twenty-first and Wu Xindeng's on the twenty-second. Grandmother Jia attended these or not as the fancy took her, sometimes coming at the beginning and staying until all the other guests had gone, sometimes only putting in a brief appearance long after her arrival had been despaired of. But she refused absolutely to turn up when friends or relations were visiting, or to attend the receptions to which they invited her, leaving Lady Xing, Lady Wang and Xi-feng to stand in for her on these occasions. Bao-yu, too - apart from a single duty visit to his uncle Wang Zi-teng's house - managed to avoid all social gatherings by saying that his grandmother needed him at home to keep her amused.
Then suddenly, when all the festivities were over, an event occurred which filled the whole household with dismay. Xi-feng had a miscarriage.
For further information on this subject you must turn to the following chapter.

CHAPTER 55

A foolish concubine seeks to humiliate her own daughter
And an ill-natured stewardess tries to outwit
Her young mistress

As we were saying, the First Month festivities in the Rongguo mansion were scarcely over when Xi-feng had a miscarriage. Confined for a month to her room by doctor's orders and with two or three physicians in daily attendance on her, she was unable to keep up her usual management of the household's affairs; yet so confident was she of her powers of recovery that she continued, in spite of remonstrances, to plan things from her sick-room, despatching Patience with messages to Lady Wang whenever she thought of something that needed doing.
Lady Wang for her part was like a woman who has lost a limb. Never at the best of times an energetic person, she attended to only the most important matters herself and left most of the routine business to Li Wan. Unfortunately Li Wan, though a model young woman in some respects, was not a good manager and allowed the servants to do more or less as they liked. Soon Lady Wang was obliged to call in Tan-chun as a reinforcement. It would only be for a month, she told them. If they could bold out for a month, Xi-feng would by then be better and would be able to take over once more.
But Xi-feng was not as robust as she supposed. Like many young people she had not been taking proper care of herself, and the excessive demands she had for some time past been making on her nervous energies had seriously weakened a constitution that was already far from strong. The miscarriage was in fact only a symptom of her body's exhaustion. A month later it was followed by the beginning of a chronic small discharge of blood from the womb. Although she was unwilling to tell anyone about it, it was apparent to everyone from her

gaunt and **yellow** look that something must be seriously the matter with her.
Lady Wang insisted that she should make a more serious effort to get better: she must follow the treatment prescribed for her; above all she must stop worrying about the household. Xi-feng was herself beginning to be afraid that the trouble might develop into a major illness which would leave her at the mercy of her enemies and was now willing to take time off to recuperate. But in spite of her impatience to get better, the weakness was not to be cured in a day, and it was not until well into the autumn of that year, after months of slow convalescence, that her body recovered its strength and the discharge of blood finally dried up.
But we anticipate. Let us return to the time about a month after the miscarriage when Lady Wang was beginning to realize that her niece was far from better and could not be expected to relieve Li Wan and Tan-chun of their duties.
Lady Wang was worried about the Garden. There were far too many people in it: she feared that they were receiving insufficient supervision. Calling Bao-chai to her, she entrusted her with their surveillance.
'Those older women are no good," she told her. 'They drink and play cards whenever they have a moment to spare. They sleep in the daytime and play cards at night, I know they do. When Feng was up and about, there was someone they were afraid of; but now that she is out of the way, I expect they do just as they please. Now my dear, I know you are a dependable person. Your cousins are too young for these matters and *I* am too busy. Will you please, for my sake, keep your eye on things for the next week or two? If you come across anything I have missed, point it out to me. I don't want Lady Jia asking me about things and finding that I don't know the answer. If you see any of the servants misbehaving, let me know. And report them if they are disobedient. Don't wait for things to get out of hand before speaking up about them.'
Bao-chai, whatever she thought of this request, could not very well refuse it.
Spring was now at its height. Dai-yu's seasonal cough had returned, and in All-spice Court Shi Xiang-yun lay ill in bed

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with some epidemic sickness that required constant medical attention. Li Wan and Tan-chun, though neighbours, were too far apart for their present circumstances, since servants had to keep going from one place to the other looking for them, so it was decided that for purposes of household management they should meet at six o'clock each morning in a little three4rame reception room on the south side of the Garden gate. They would eat their lunch there and would be available for seeing people on household business there up to the end of the morning.
This reception room had originally been intended as a place for the senior eunuchs to sit at the time of the Visitation. After the Visitation was over there was no further use for it -in the daytime, at any rate; at night it provided a convenient meeting-place for the women who made up the watch. Now that the weather was getting warmer, it did not need a great deal doing to it - beyond moving in one or two pieces of furniture - to turn it into a comfortable office for the young managers. It had a board over the doorway bearing the inscription

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but the servants always referred to it simply as 'the jobs room'.
Thither, then, at six o'clock each morning the two sisters-in-law repaired and sat there until noon while a stream of stewardesses and serving women trooped in and out reporting on their duties and asking for their instructions.
To begin with, when the servants heard that Li Wan would be managing the household on her own, all of them were secretly pleased. She was known to be a kind, easy-going sort of person who disliked giving punishments, and with her in command they felt sure that it would be much easier than usual to get away with things. Even the addition of Tan-chun did not materially alter these expectations. Tan-chun was young and unmarried and, so far as one could judge, a quiet and docile girl. They foresaw no trouble from that quarter and were, as a consequence, inclined to take liberties in her presence that they would not have dared to do with Xi-feng.

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Within only a few days of her arrival, however, they had begun to sense, from the way in which she handled one or two of the matters that were brought to her attention, that though quieter-spoken than Xi-feng and of a much more equable disposition, she yielded nothing to her in thoroughness.

By coincidence it happened that about this time a dozen or more important events - promotions, demotions, marriages, deaths and the like - occurred in rapid succession among the group of aristocratic and official families connected by matrimonial or other ties with the Ning-guo and Rong-guo Jias, and for days on end Lady Wang's time was taken up with visits of condolence or felicitation. Some responsible person was needed to stand in for her while she was away; so while Li Wan and Tan-chun spent all their mornings in the office, Bao-chai spent hers in Lady Wang's apartment, only leaving it when her aunt got home from her visiting. At night the three young guardians spent whatever time could be spared from their sewing patrolling the Garden in sedans, escorted by the old women of the watch. Working together in this way they soon came to feel that they had evolved a system of supervision more careful even than Xi-feng's - a view amply borne out by the grumbles of the domestics themselves:

'No sooner is the Terror of the Seas put out of action than along come these three Scourges of the Mountains to take her place. Nowadays you can't even take time off for a quiet drink of a night or a little game of cards!'

A day came when Lady Wang was due to attend a luncheon at the Marquis of Jin-xiang's. Li Wan and Tan-chun, after an early toilet, had attended her to the gate and seen her off. They had just got back to their office and were enjoying a morning cup of tea when Wu Xin-deng's wife came in to report:

'Mrs Zhao's brother, Zhao Guo-ji, died yesterday. I told Her Ladyship and she said I was to report it to you.

Having delivered this brief communiqué', she stood in silence, her arms held stiffly at her sides, waiting for a reply. A number of stewardesses who were waiting their turn to report, pricked up their ears at this mention of Tan-chun's natural mother and waited with interest to see what the two young deputies would decide. If their decision was a good one,

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they would in future treat them with respect; but if it was one in which there was the slightest possibility of picking holes, not only would they not respect them, but afterwards, when they got back outside, they would have many a good laugh at their expense.

The behaviour of Wu Xin-deng's wife on this occasion was quite deliberate. If it had been Xi-feng that she was reporting to, she would have demonstrated her efficiency by making one or two helpful suggestions, having armed herself beforehand with some precedents for Xi-feng to choose from; but as it was only Li Wan and Tan-chun, one of whom she despised for her softness and the other for her youth, she merely stated her business and left them to flounder unaided.

Tan-chun turned questioningly to Li Wan.

'When Aroma's mother died recently, didn't they give her forty taels?' said Li Wan after thinking for a bit. 'I suppose we'd better give her forty taels.'

'Yes ma'am,' said Wu Xin-deng's wife, and taking up a tally, went hurrying off to collect the money.

‘Just a minute!’ Tan-chun called out after her.

Wu xinLdeng’s wife returned - a trifle reluctantly it could be observed.

‘Don’t collect that money yet,’ said Tan-chun. ‘There’s something I want to ask you. Of the old women in Lady Jia’s apartment who used to be chamber-wives when my grandfather was alive, some must have been home-reared and some must have been bought outside. There’s a different scale for the two kinds, isn’t there? How much do the home-reared ones get when someone in their family dies and how much do the ones from outside get? Give us one or two examples so that we have something to go on.’

Not having prepared herself for such a question, Wu Xindeng’s wife was unable to answer it. She covered up for herself, all smiles:

‘It’s not a very important matter. Just give what you think. No one’s going to question your decision.’

Tan-chun smiled back:

‘Now you are talking nonsense. Suppose I said, “Give her a hundred taels”? No, we have to give what is right: other-

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wise, quite apart from the fact that *you* will all laugh at us, how am I going to face Mrs Lian when I next see her?’

‘Very good then, I’ll go and look up the old accounts,’ said Wu Xin-deng’s wife. ‘I can’t at the moment remember.’

‘You’ve been working here all these years and you can’t remember?’ said Tan-chun. ‘I think you are trying to make things difficult for us. I can’t believe that you have to go off and look things up when Mrs Lian asks you a question. If you do, all I can say is that she is not such a strict mistress as she is supposed to be: in fact, I should say that she was a rather indulgent one. All right, hurry up and fetch the accounts then! If this matter is delayed, it isn’t your negligence that will be blamed but our incompetence.’

Blushing to the roots of her hair, Wu Xin-deng’s wife hurried off to do as she was bidden. The other women gasped and stuck their tongues out in surprise. Reporting on other matters continued in her absence.

After a little while she returned with the account-books. On examination Tan-chun found two instances of home-reared concubines receiving twenty taels and two of ‘outsiders’ receiving forty taels. She also found an instance of an outsider receiving a hundred taels and one of an outsider receiving sixty; but in each case a note explaining special circumstances had been made against the entry: in the first case the body of a parent had had to be conveyed in its coffin for interment in another province and the extra sixty taels was to cover the cost of transport; in the second case the extra twenty taels was for the purchase of a plot of ground for burial. Tan-chun handed Li Wan the relevant account to look at, while at the same time informing Wu Xin-deng’s wife of her decision:

‘Give her twenty taels. And leave these accounts with us, so that we can have a good look at them.’

Wu Xin-deng’s wife went off once more.

The next thing that happened was that Aunt Zhao came stalking in. Li Wan and Tan-chun invited her to be seated, but Aunt Zhao was in no mood for polite preliminaries.

‘Everyone in this family tramples on me,’ she said, addressing herself to Tan-chun. ‘Don’t you think that *you* at least might stick up for me?’

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She began crying messily, the abundant moisture seeming to come as much from her nostrils as from her eyes.

‘Who are you complaining about?’ said Tan-chun. ‘I really don’t understand you. *Who’s* been trampling on you? If you would tell me, perhaps I might be able to “stick up” for you.’

‘You have, for a start,’ said Aunt Zhao. ‘That doesn’t leave me anyone to turn to, does it?’

Tan-chun leaped to her feet:

‘I shouldn’t dream of trampling on you.’

Li Wan, too, stood up and made some soothing remark or other. But Aunt Zhao was not to be placated:

‘Sit down both of you, and listen to me. I’ve given the best years of my life to this family - years and years and years. I’ve borne two children for them, you and your brother. And now, after all that, I’m not even to be treated as well as Aroma. What sort of face does that leave me with? What sort of face does it leave *you* with - never mind me?’

Tan-chun laughed mirthlessly:

‘Oh *that’s* what this is about! The simple answer to that is that I have to follow the rules.’

She sat down again, opened up the account-book and, holding it out for Aunt Zhao to see, read the relevant entries out to her.

‘These regulations were laid down by the ancestors for everyone to follow. *I* can’t suddenly go altering them. It isn’t just Aroma. It will be exactly the same if one day Huan has a chamber-wife from outside. If someone in her family dies, then, as an outsider, she will get exactly the same amount as Aroma did. It has nothing to do with who is more important than whom. It isn’t a matter of prestige at all. Zhao Guo-ji was Lady Wang’s bondservant.

That means that he belongs to the "home-reared" class. The rules lay down a certain scale of payments for that class. All I have done is to follow the rules. I am sure that Zhao Guo-ji must approve and be grateful to the ancestors and Lady Wang for their generosity. If he doesn't - if he thinks he is being unfairly treated - then all I can say is that he is stupid and ungrateful and one can't really care very much *what* he thinks. As regards face, it makes no difference to me whether Lady Wang gives him everything

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she's got or nothing at all. And I really do think that while she is away you might try to compose yourself a bit and not go working yourself up into such a state. Although Lady Wang is so good to me, I am constantly worried that you will spoil everything with your perpetual trouble-making. If I'd been a boy I should have left home long ago and done something to show myself worthy of her kindness; but as I am a girl, I have to stay at home and never say a word out of turn. I believe she realizes this, and because she thinks highly of me she has entrusted me with this managing job as a means of proving myself. But before I have had a chance to do anything, you have to come along and start making things difficult for me. If Lady Wang gets to hear of it, she will probably conclude that the job is too hard for me and take it away again. That would be a *real* loss of face - for you as well as for me.'

Tan-chun's shoulders began to shake as she said this and she ended up by bursting into tears.

Aunt Zhao did not really have an answer to what Tan-chun had said, so she tried another tack.

'If Lady Wang is so fond of you, you ought to use your position to give us a helping hand. The fact is, though, you are so anxious to keep in her good books that you forget about us altogether.'

'Of course I don't forget about you,' said Tan-chun. 'But what do you mean by giving you a "helping hand"? A good mistress will always be favourable to those who try hard and make themselves useful, and a good servant doesn't need any "helping hand" in order to keep in her favour.'

Li Wan hovered between them, still trying to act the peace maker:

'Please don't be angry, Mrs Zhao. You mustn't blame Tanchun. I'm sure she's most anxious to give you all the help she can; but you could hardly expect her to say so.'

'Don't talk such stuff, Wan!' said Tan-chun impatiently. 'Help *whom*, for goodness sake? Whoever heard of the young mistress in a family *helping* the servants? Their private interests are no concern of mine, as you perfectly well know.'

'We're not talking about "servants", we're talking about

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me,' said Aunt Zhao angrily. 'If you hadn't been in charge now, I'd never have asked you. At this particular moment you happen to be in charge here. Very well. Your mother's brother has just died. If you decide to give an extra twenty or thirty taels towards his funeral, Her Ladyship isn't going to stop you, is she? Of course she isn't. We all know what a good, kind person Her Ladyship is. It's mean, tight-fisted people like you interfering that stop her being generous. I simply don't know what you're worried about. It isn't *your* money you're spending. I'd been hoping that one of these days when you grew up and got married you'd be able to do our Zhao family a bit of good. But not you! You're in such a hurry to find a higher branch to perch on, you've forgotten the nest even before your feathers are full-grown I'

Tan-chun went white, and for a moment anger deprived her of her breath. When she regained it she broke into louder sobs.

'Who is this "mother's brother"? The only mother's brother I know about is the one who has just been appointed Inspector-General of Armies in the Nine Provinces. I'm sure I always try to show respect where it is due, but no one ever told me that I ought to think of Zhao Guo-ji as my uncle. If so, how is it that he always stood up for Huan and walked behind him on his way to school in the mornings? Why didn't he insist on being treated as an uncle by Huan? But what's the point? Everyone knows it was you who bore me. Two or three months never go by without your making a scene about something or other just to give yourself an opportunity of proclaiming the fact. *And you* talk about face! It's a good job I understand your little game. If I were a simple-minded person and not very sure of my position, it would have driven me distracted long ago.'

The ever more agitated attempts at peace-making by Li Wan and continuing gabble of complaint from Aunt Zhao which followed this outburst were suddenly interrupted by a call from the women outside:

'Here's Miss Patience with a message from Mrs Lian.'

At once Aunt Zhao fell silent. She advanced fawningly on Patience as she entered:

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'Is your mistress any better, Patience? I've been meaning to go round and see her, but I just haven't had the time.'

Li Wan asked Patience what she had come for.

'Mrs Lian heard that Mrs Zhao's brother had died and she was afraid you might not know what to give. She said according to the rule it should be twenty taels, but in this particular case Miss Tan should feel free to add on a bit if she sees fit.'

‘Oh? On what grounds, I wonder?’ said Tan-chun, who had by this time wiped the traces of tears from her face. ‘I’m not aware that there was anything very special about this person. His mother didn’t carry him for twenty-four months before he was born. He didn’t rescue his master on the battlefield from under a heap of corpses and carry him to safety on his back. It is very ingenious of your mistress, getting *me* to break the rules so that *she* can take the credit for being generous, but if she wishes to play the Lady Bountiful by giving away other people’s money, I’m afraid she will have to wait. Tell her that I absolutely refuse to take responsibility for any change in the rules. If *she* wants to make a change, let her wait until she is better. Then she can add on as much as she likes!’

Patience had already had a rough idea of the situation when she arrived and by the time Tan-chun finished speaking she had sized it up completely. Observing the anger in Tan-chun’s face, she did not presume to reply in the joking, light-hearted manner she would normally have adopted with her, but stood in silence, with her arms held submissively at her sides.

It was now about the time when Bao-chai usually came over from Lady Wang’s apartment for discussion. Tan-chun and Li Wan stood up to greet her as she entered and invited her to sit with them. Before they had a chance to begin talking, however, one of the women who had been waiting outside came in to make her report.

Because Tan-chun had recently been crying, three or four maids had already been to fetch water and towels and a hand-mirror so that she could wash her face. As she was at this moment sitting cross-legged on a low wooden couch, the maid carrying the hand-basin went down on both her knees

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to bring it to a convenient level for her, whereupon the girls bearing the towels, hand-mirror, cosmetics and so forth also knelt down on either side. Seeing that Tan-chun’s body-servant Scribe was not present, Patience hurriedly stepped forward, rolled back Tan-chun’s sleeves for her, removed her bracelets and tucked a large towel round her neck to protect the front of her dress. As Tan-chun stretched out her hands to begin washing, the woman who had just entered began to make her report:

‘Excuse me Mrs Zhu; excuse me Miss Tan. The school want to draw this year’s allowance for Master Huan and Master Lan.’

‘What’s the hurry?’ snapped Patience. ‘Haven’t you got eyes in your head? Can’t you see that Miss Tan is washing? You ought to be waiting outside. What do you mean by bursting in like this? Would you behave like this if Mrs Lian were here? Miss Tan is a kind young lady and lets you get away with it, but if I tell Mrs Lian when I get back how little respect you show her, you’ll be in serious trouble - and don’t say I didn’t warn you!’

Thoroughly alarmed, the woman put on her broadest smile and retreated, apologizing, from the room.

Tan-chun, who had finished washing and was now making up her face, looked up at Patience with a sardonic smile:

‘It’s a pity you didn’t come a bit earlier. You missed the best part of the comedy. Wu xin-deng’s wife, who has spent a whole lifetime in service, came here without having bothered to look up the records, in the hope of making us look foolish. Fortunately I thought to ask her what the rule was; but then she had the effrontery to tell me that she had forgotten. I told her that I didn’t think she would forget things and have to go off and look them up if it was your mistress that she was dealing with.’

‘I should think not, indeed!’ said Patience. ‘If she *had* ever tried a trick like that on Mrs Lian, she’d have some nasty scars on her backside to show for it, I can tell you! Don’t you believe any of them, miss! They think that because Mrs Zhu is such a kind, saintly person and you are such a quiet, shy young lady they can get away with anything.’

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She turned to address the women who were standing outside the door:

‘Keep it up all of you! Just carry on with these little tricks! See what happens to you when Mrs Lian is better!’

‘Now, now, you know us better than that, miss!’ said the women, laughing. “‘Let him face the summons that did the offence”. *We* wouldn’t pull the wool over a young mistress’s eyes. We know perfectly well that if a young unmarried lady like Miss Tan was to get really angry with us, it would be more than our lives was worth.’

‘Well, as long as you know, that’s all tight,’ said Patience drily. She turned back to Tan-chun. ‘I’m sure you must realize, miss: Mrs Lian is much too busy to think of everything and there must be quite a few things that she’s over1ooked, They say “the bystander sees all”, and during the years that you’ve been quietly looking on as a bystander you may have noticed cases in which more or perhaps less ought to be given that Mrs Lian herself has never got around to dealing with. If you were to take this opportunity of putting them right, you’d be doing Her Ladyship a good turn and at the same time it would be a kindness to my mistress which I’m sure she would appreciate.’

Before she bad finished, Bao-chai and Li Wan were both laughing.

‘Patience, you’re wonderful! No wonder Feng is so devoted to you. The way you’ve just put it, you make us feel that even if there are no grounds for altering the rules, we ought to try and find some, just so as not to disappoint you!’

Tan-chun joined in their laughter:

'I still feel very angry. Until *she* came along, I was hoping to work some of it off on her mistress, but she's been so reasonable about it all that I hardly know what to do!'

She called in the woman whom Patience had chased out a few minutes earlier.

'What *are* these allowances for Master Huan and Master Lan that the school is asking for?'

'Eight taels each a year, miss. It's for paper, writing-brushes and refreshments.'

'But these expenses are already provided for in the *monthly*

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allowances,' said Tan-chun. 'Mrs Zhao gets two taels a month for Huan, Aroma gets two a month for Bao-yu from Her Ladyship, and Lan's expenses are covered by Mrs Zhu's allowance. Why should we pay an additional eight taels for each of them to the school? Is that what they go to school for, to collect the money? I think we should cancel that payment from now on. Patience, go back and tell your mistress: I insist that these payments should be discontinued.'

'They should have been long ago,' said Patience. 'Mrs Lian had decided to stop them last year, but with so much going on over the New Year, she forgot about it.'

The woman who had come for the allowances had to go off empty-handed.

Women from Prospect Garden now arrived carrying food-boxes containing Li Wan's and Tan-chun's lunch. They were preceded by the maids Scribe and Candida who carried a little table between them which they put down in front of their mistresses. Patience busied herself by taking dishes from the food-boxes and putting them on the table; but Tan-chun stopped her:

'If you have nothing more to say, you had better be about your own business. There is nothing for you to do here.'

'I haven't got any other business,' said Patience, smiling. 'That's why Mrs Lian sent me here. Partly it was to bring you the message, but partly it was because she was afraid the servants here might be giving you trouble and she thought I might be able to make myself useful.'

'Why hasn't Miss Bao's lunch been brought here so that she can eat with us?' Tan-chun inquired.

At once one of the maids went outside and gave an order to the women who were waiting there under the eaves:

'Miss Bao's going to have her lunch here with the other young ladies. Tell them to bring it here.'

The raised voice of Tan-chun, who had overheard her, issued from behind her in reproof:

'Who are you ordering about like that? Those are stewardesses out there and senior members of the domestic staff. You can't make them run to and fro fetching and carrying things for you. Have you *no* respect for seniority? Patience is

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standing around here with nothing to do: why don't you get *her* to go?'

Not waiting to be ordered, Patience murmured something and hurried out; but the women outside silently waylaid her and with broad smiles prevented her from going.

'We can't let *you* go, miss: that would never do! In any case, we've already sent someone.'

They dusted the steps with their handkerchiefs and invited her to sit down:

'There you are, miss, sit there in the sun and rest yourself. You must be tired after standing about for so long.'

Patience was about to sit down when two women from the tea-kitchen rushed up to her with a rug:

'That stone's too cold to sit on. Here's a nice clean rug. You sit on this, miss.'

Patience smiled and nodded:

'Thank you very much.'

Another woman came out carrying a cup of tea for her on a tray.

'Here you are, miss,' she whispered. 'This isn't the tea we usually drink. This is the kind we make for the mistresses. Try some of that for a change.'

Patience bowed and took the cup, then, shaking a reproving finger at the women, she admonished them in a voice that she kept low so as not to be audible inside:

'You've gone too far this time and no mistake! Miss Tan is a real little lady, but just because she is too well-bred to throw her weight about, it doesn't mean that you can afford to take advantage of her. On the contrary, you ought to respect her all the more for it. If she were ever to get really angry, my word you would be in trouble! It wouldn't just be a question of saying "sorry" then. If she took it into her head to throw a tantrum, even Her Ladyship would have to give in to her. Mrs Lian certainly wouldn't stand in her way, she wouldn't dare. So just what makes you so bold against her I do not know. You might just as well pelt a rock with eggs as set yourselves up against her!'

'*We* wouldn't dare set ourselves up against her,' said the women. 'This was all Mrs Zhao's doing.'

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‘Oh, come on now!’ said Patience, still speaking in a halfwhisper. ‘Everyone likes to push a falling wall. We all know that Mrs Zhao isn’t the most sensible of mortals. She doesn’t know whether she’s coming or going half the time. It’s just a bit too easy to blame it all on her when things go wrong. Do you think after all the years I’ve been here I don’t know how unmanageable and how ruthless you can be? If Mrs Lian were just a shade less determined, she’d have been finished off by you lot years ago. As it is, you only need half a chance to start making things difficult for her. Many and many’s the time she’s nearly come unstuck because of your whispering. Everyone’s always saying what a holy terror *she* is and how you’re all afraid of her. I’m probably the only one who realizes that in her heart of hearts *she’s* actually afraid of *you.* As a matter of fact she and I were talking about this only the other day. We both agreed that if you didn’t make yourselves a bit more accommodating, there were sure to be one or two explosions. Miss Tan may be only a young girl, but you’re completely mistaken in treating her like this. Even Mrs Lian is a tiny bit scared of Miss Tan. Of all the young ladies in this household Miss Tan is the only one she feels that way about. And yet *you* think you can do what you like with her!’

Just then Ripple approached and the women all crowded round to greet her.

‘Better stay outside with us for a bit, miss,’ they said. ‘They’ve just laid for lunch inside. Better wait until they take the table away before going in to report anything.’

‘I’m not like you,’ said Ripple loftily. ‘I can’t wait.’

She began mounting the steps.

‘Come back at once!’ Patience called after her.

Ripple looked back and saw that it was Patience.

‘Oh, what are *you* doing here? Sentry duty?’

She came down again then and sat beside Patience on the rug.

‘What have you come about?’ Patience asked her in a low voice.

‘I want to ask about Bao-yu’s and our allowances for this month. We’ve been wondering when we’re going to get them.’

‘Oh *that!’* said Patience. ‘That’s not very important. Go back and tell Aroma this - say *I* told you to tell her: no matter what it is, don’t come here asking for anything today. Anything you ask for will be refused. If you ask for a hundred things, one after the other, the answer will be “no” every time.’

‘Why’s that?’ said Ripple.

Patience and the women explained, pointing out that to go in and ask for something on Bao-yu’s behalf at the very moment when Tan-chun was looking around for someone of consequence to make an example of would be simply courting disaster.

‘There’s no sense in your going in now,’ said Patience. ‘Either way it will be awkward. If they make an example of Bao-yu they will risk offending Their Ladyships; if they don’t make an example of him You Know Who will call it favouritism and complain that they daren’t provoke anyone who has Their Ladyships behind them and only take it out on the weak ones who can’t protect themselves. You wait and see: they’ll even turn down one or two requests from Mrs Lian before they’ve finished, just to stop certain people talking.’

Ripple stuck her tongue out in a grimace.

‘It’s a good job I met *you* here. I should only have got smut on my nose if I’d gone inside. I’d better go back straight away then and tell the others.’

She rose and went away.

Presently Bao-chai’s lunch arrived and Patience went inside again to help serve it. By this time Aunt Zhao had already left. The three young women sat cross-legged on the wooden settle around the low lunch-table which had been placed upon it, Bao-chai facing south, towards the doorway, Tan-chun facing west and Li Wan facing east. Only their personal maids stayed inside the room to serve them; no one else dared enter. The women waited quietly on the verandah outside, discussing the situation in whispers:

‘Better keep out of trouble from now on. Better not try any more funny business. Look what happened to Mrs Wu, and she’s ever so much senior to us!’

Their whispered conversation continued intermittently until lunch was over. They knew it was over when the sound

of chopsticks on bowls and dishes ceased and only an occasional low cough could be heard from inside. Presently a maid appeared in the doorway and held the portiere up high to let two other maids through who were carrying out the lunch-table. Another three maids with wash-basins were already waiting outside who went in as soon as the other two had finished carrying out the table. Soon they too came out again, each carrying a wash-basin as before and also a spittoon. Then Scribe, Candida and Oriole arrived, each with a covered teacup on a tray, and went in. A little later this last trio reemerged. As they did so, Scribe stopped for a moment to admonish the junior maids who were remaining behind:

‘Now do your job properly. We’ll be back to relieve you as soon as we’ve had our lunch. No sneaking off to sit down while we’re away!’

The departure of Scribe and the other two was a signal for the women outside to begin going in, one by one, to report on their various business. They did this sedately enough, with none of the careless insolence they had been showing previously. Tan-chun's customary good nature gradually reasserted itself and presently she turned to Patience and addressed her in a normal tone of voice:
'There's an important matter that I have been wanting to consult your mistress about. I'm glad I've remembered it now. Come back again as soon as you have finished your lunch, while Miss Bao is still here, and the four of us can discuss it together; then, when we've worked out all the details, we can ask your mistress whether to go forward with it or not.'
'Yes, miss,' said Patience, and promptly left.
When she got back, Xi-feng asked her why she had been so long and received a full account of what had happened which greatly entertained her.
'Good! Good!' she said. 'Good for Tan-chun! I always said she'd make an excellent little manager. Oh, what a pity she wasn't born in the right bed I'
'Now you're talking stupid, madam,' said Patience. 'Although she's not Her Ladyship's child by birth, surely no one is going to think any the worse of her because of that? Won't she always be treated exactly the same as the rest?'

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Xi-feng sighed:
'I'm afraid it's not quite as simple as you think. I know being a wife's or a concubine's child is not *supposed* to make any difference, and in a boy's case perhaps it doesn't; but I'm afraid with girls, when the time comes to start finding husbands for them, it often does. Nowadays you get a very shallow class of person who will ask about that before anything else and often, if they hear that the girl is a concubine's child, will have nothing further to do with her. It's silly, really, because if they did but know it, even the maids in a household like ours are better than the wife's daughters in many another household, let alone the daughters of concubines. In the case of girls like Tan-chun and Ying-chun it's hard to say. They might be unlucky and make a bad match through being discriminated against, or then again they might be lucky: someone might come along who didn't care about these distinctions and they might make a perfectly good marriage.'
Xi-feng paused for a moment and smiled at Patience confidingly:
'Because of all the economies I've introduced during these last few years there's hardly anyone in this household who doesn't secretly hate me. But it's like riding a tiger: I daren't relax my grip for a single moment for fear of being eaten. In any case, our expenditure is still far above our income. The trouble is, everything in this household from the largest down to the smallest item has to be done on a scale and according to rules that were laid down by our ancestors; but unfortunately the income from our property is not what it was in their days. If we do economize, the family looks ridiculous, Their Ladyships feel uncomfortable, and the servants complain of our harshness; yet if we don't economize, in a very few years' time we shall be bankrupt.'
'I know;' said Patience. 'And there are three or four young ladies and two or three young masters to provide for, and Her Old Ladyship: all these big expenses are yet to come.'
'Ah, I've allowed for them,' said Xi-feng. 'Those expenses I think we can just about manage. Bao-yu's bride-price and Miss Lin's dowry won't involve us in any expense because

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> Her Old Ladyship will pay them Out of her private savings and Miss Ying will be taken care of by Sir She. Of the girls, that only leaves Miss Tan and Miss Xi. They're not going to cost more than seven or eight thousand each at the outside. Then there's Huan: they're not going to spend all that much on him: say three thousand. Even if we can't raise all of that, we can probably get by with a little judicious pruning. As for Her Old Ladyship: the main things have been paid for already; there will only be various miscellaneous expenses. Four or five thousand will probably be ample. No, as long as we can economize a bit, we shall be able to deal with *those* expenses as they come along. What really worries me is the possibility of one or two large items of expenditure turning up which we hadn't been expecting. Then I am afraid we really *shall* be done for!

'But let's not worry about these far-off things just now. You must hurry up and have your lunch so that you can get back and find out what it is they want to talk about. I'm delighted that things should be turning out in this way. It's what I've. always wanted, someone to take a bit of the weight off my shoulders. There's Bao-yu of course; but he isn't really one of us, so even if I were to win him over, he wouldn't be very much use. Mrs Zhu is such a Holy Buddha, *she's* no good. Miss Ying's even worse - and anyway she doesn't properly belong to this household. Miss Xi is still childish. Lan is little more than a baby. Huan is like a singed cat in the cold, only looking for a warm stove or a corner of a kang to curl up on - How the same mother could produce two children such poles apart as him and Tan-chun I never shall understand I - Miss Lin and Miss Bao are both very capable girls, but unfortunately they're not of our surname and can't very well be expected to involve themselves in running our affairs. And in any case, one of them's like a beautiful picture-lantern: you feel that a puff of wind would blow her out; and the other is so determined not to open her mouth about what doesn't concern her that a shake or a nod or an "I don't know" is about all you can ever get out of her and you feel a bit awkward about

asking her to do anything. And that only leaves Miss Tan. She's got a good mind; she's good at expressing

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herself; she belongs to the right lineage; Her Ladyship likes her; she's a bit unsure of herself perhaps, but that's all the doing of that wretched Zhao woman; in other respects she's very much like Bao-yu. She's certainly not in the least like Huan. He really is the most objectionable child. If I had my way he'd have been sent packing long ago. No, if she's got the determination to do this job, let's go along with her, I say. Let's make an ally of her, so that I don't have to go on feeling so isolated. From a high-minded, honourable point of view, having her to help us will save us a good deal of anxiety, and in the long run Her Ladyship will benefit. But there is also a not so high-minded, rather more selfish way of looking at it. I've been too ruthless, I know I have. I *ought* to step back now and take stock of things. I can't keep the pressure up any longer. People hate me so much already, there are daggers in their smiles. You and I have only two pairs of eyes between us. If I carry on as I have been doing, sooner or later they are bound to catch us off our guard and I shall be destroyed. So you see, her stepping forward and taking command just when things are at their liveliest means that the heat will be turned off *me* for the time being and people's resentment against me will have a chance to cool down.

There's something else I want to say to you. I know you are a very intelligent person, but I am afraid you may find it rather hard to transfer your allegiance, so I want to impress this on you now. Although Miss Tan may be only a girl, there are very few things that she doesn't know about. You mustn't be taken in by her quiet manner. In fact, being able to read and write, she's if anything better equipped to manage things than I am. Now they always say that anyone who wants to break a gang up should begin by arresting the leader, and her immediate concern must be to make an example of someone as a means of establishing her authority. That being so, you can be quite sure that *I* shall be the person she'll pick on first to make an example of. If she starts criticizing anything I have said or done, don't try to defend it; just be very polite and say that the criticism is justified. Don't, whatever you do, stand up to her out of a mistaken sense of loyalty to me: that's the last thing I want you to do.'

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Before she could go on, Patience laughingly interrupted her:

'Why are you so ready to assume that other people are stupid? I've been taking that line with her already; I don't need *you* to tell me!'

'I was afraid you might have no time for anyone but me,' said Xi-feng. That was my only reason for warning you. If you have been taking that line with her already, so much the better. Evidently you are cleverer than I am. By the way, aren't you perhaps getting a little carried away - this "you", "you", "you" all of a sudden? What's wrong with "madam"?'

'I'll say "you" if I want to,' said Patience. 'If you don't like it, there's always my face to slap. It won't be the first time it's enjoyed that privilege!'

'Little beast!' said Xi-feng. 'How many times do you intend to go on dragging *that* up? Fancy provoking me with a thing like that when you know how *ill* I am! Come on! There aren't any visitors about. Come over and sit here with me. We'd better get on with our lunch.'

Felicity and three or four junior maids came in at this point carrying a short-legged table between them which they set down on the kang. Xi-feng's lunch consisted of no more than some bird's nest soup and a couple of small, light dishes suitable for an invalid palate. Unable to eat more, she had cancelled the portion that under normal catering arrangements would have been her due. Felicity put the four dishes to which Patience was entitled on Xi-feng's table and filled her a bowlful of rice. Patience then half sat, half stood with one foot curled underneath her on the edge of the kang and the other one resting on the floor, and in that position kept Xi-feng company while she ate her lunch. When they had both finished eating, she helped Xi-feng to wash and rinse Out her mouth, then, after a few admonitory words to Felicity, went back to rejoin Tan-chun and the others in the office.

Outside the office building the forecourt was quiet and deserted. The stewardesses who had formerly been waiting there had now all gone off about their business.

What happened when she went inside will be related in the following chapter.

CHAPTER 56

Resourceful Tan-chun abolishes abuses
in the interests of economy
And sapient Bao-chai shows how small concessions
can be made without loss of dignity

Having kept Xi-feng company while she ate her lunch and waited on her while she rinsed her mouth out and washed, Patience made her way back to the lobs room'. The courtyard outside it was quiet now, deserted except for the silent row of maids and womenservants waiting outside the windows until their mistresses inside the room should require them. The latter were already in the midst of a discussion. They were talking about Lai Da's garden, which they had visited in Grandmother Jia's company some months previously on the occasion of the party which had had such unfortunate consequences for Xue Pan. Tan-chun broke off as Patience entered and indicated a low stool for her to sit on.

'I've been thinking about those two taels we get every month for hair-oil and cosmetics,' she told Patience. 'We already get a monthly allowance of two taels each and our maids get allowances too. It looks to me as if this is another case of duplication, like the eight taels paid to the school every year which we were dealing with earlier. I know it's not a very important matter, and the sum involved is not very great, but it's obvious at a glance that this is a bad arrangement, and I can't understand why your mistress hasn't noticed it.'

'There is a reason,' said Patience. 'Obviously you young ladies need a regular fixed.supply of these things, and as there wouldn't be much sense in our constantly running out with a few coppers to make individual purchases, the cosmetic allowances for the various departments are drawn by our buyers and used to make bulk purchases with. The stewardesses collect monthly supplies from the buyers and distribute them to the different apartments, and we maids in the different

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apartments look after them for use by you as and when you need them. The two-tael monthly allowance you get is quite separate from the cosmetics money. It isn't *meant* to be spent on cosmetics; it's simply to keep you in money, so that if the need should ever arise to spend on something, you shouldn't have the inconvenience of finding yourselves short and perhaps running round for some only to find that Her Ladyship or whoever is in charge at the time is out or too busy to see you. I have to admit though that about half of us do in fact seem to go outside these arrangements and buy cosmetics with our spending money; but whether it's because the official buyers simply pocket the money and don't deliver the goods, or because the stuff they supply us with is so inferior, I simply don't know.'

Tan-chun and Li Wan exchanged knowing smiles.

'*You*'ve noticed, too, then,' said Tan-chun. 'I don't think they actually embezzle the money, but sometimes the supply is very much delayed. If you try to hurry them they produce something so awful that it is quite unusable, and in the end you are forced to buy your own. There's only one way of doing that, too. You have to give a couple of taels to a nannie and ask her to get one of her sons or nephews to buy it for you. It's no good trying to do it through the regular staff. If you do, you only get the same awful, unusable stuff as before, I don't know why.'

'It's because if they bought you stuff of better quality, they'd be in trouble with the regular buyers,' said Patience. 'The regular buyers would complain that they were trying to do them out of a job. They'd rather offend *you* than risk offending the buyers. Of course, if you get the stuff through your nannies, there's nothing the buyers can do about it'

'Well, I am very uneasy about the whole arrangement,' said Tan-chun. 'Here we are paying the same money twice over and half the stuff that is paid for has to be wasted. It would be much better if this monthly payment to the buyers were abolished altogether. That's one thing. Another thing is this. Last year when we went to Lai Da's place, you went too. What did you think of that little garden of theirs? How do you think it compares with ours?'

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'It's not half as big,' said Patience, 'and it has far, far fewer trees and flowers and things in it.

'I got talking to one of the daughters while we were there,' said Tan-chun. 'That garden of theirs is let out annually on contract. She told me that quite apart from supplying them through the year with flowers for their hair and with all the bamboo-shoots, vegetables and fish that they eat, it brings them in an annual income of two hundred taels of silver. Ever since that day I have realized that even a broken lotus-leaf or a withered grass-root is worth something.'

Bao-chai laughed.

'There speaks the voice of gilded youth. How typical! But even though, O delicately-nurtured one, you have no immediate experience of such matters, you can, after all, read and write. Surely you must at some time or other have read Zhuxius's essay "On Not Throwing Away"?'

'Yes,' said Tan-chun, 'but in that essay isn't he merely urging the people, in a fairly general sort of way, to exert themselves? And isn't it all rather empty and rhetorical? Surely he didn't mean every word of it to be taken literally?'

'Zhuxius empty and rhetorical?' said Bao-chai. 'He meant every word of it. If, after only a few days of household management, the greed for gain has already so clouded your judgement that the teachings of Zhuxius seem empty and rhetorical, I fancy that if you were to venture outside into the corrupting atmosphere of the market-place, you would soon be finding even Confucius himself too abstract for you!'

'Since you are so learned,' said Tan-chun, 'I'm surprised that you should appear to be unfamiliar with the

views of Fixius. Fixius once said, “Whosoever sets his foot in the market-place or takes his seat at the counting-board must forget about Yao and Shun and turn his back on the teachings of Confucius and Mencius...”‘

‘How does it go on?’ said Bao-chai.

‘I must claim the quoter’s privilege of giving only as much of the text as will suit my purpose,’ said Tan-chun. ‘If I told you how it went on, I should end up by contradicting myself!’

‘Everything in the world has some use or other,’ said Bao-

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chai, ‘and if it has a use, it must have a monetary value. Surely to an intelligent person like you so obvious a truism can hardly have come as a revelation?’

‘You call people here to discuss important business,’ said Li Wan, ‘but all we have had so far is talk about books!’

‘But talk about books *is* important business,’ said Bao-chai. ‘Without it we should be no better than vulgar tradesmen I’

The three of them continued chaffing a little longer before Tan-chun returned to her theme:

‘Let’s say for the sake of argument that our garden is only twice as big as theirs. Doubling the income they get from theirs would mean a clear profit of four hundred taels per annum. Now of course, a family like ours couldn’t possibly put its garden under contract and turn it into a business in the way that they do it would look too mercenary. On the other hand, when you know how valuable everything is, it seems a terrible waste of natural resources not to have a few people whose special job is to look after it and just let everyone trample on it and despoil it as they please. *I* think we ought to pick out a few experienced trustworthy old women from among the ones who work in the Garden - women who know something about gardening already - and put the upkeep of the Garden into their hands. We needn’t ask them to pay us rent; all we need ask them for is an annual share of the produce. There would be four advantages in this arrangement. In the first place, if we have people whose sole occupation is to look after trees and flowers and so on, the condition of the garden will improve gradually year after year and there will be no more of those long periods of neglect followed by bursts of feverish activity when things have been allowed to get out of hand. Secondly there won’t be the spoiling and wastage we get at present. Thirdly the women themselves will gain a little extra to add to their incomes which will compensate them for the hard work they put in throughout the year. And fourthly, there’s no reason why we shouldn’t use the money we should otherwise have spent on nurserymen, rockery specialists, horticultural cleaners and so on for other purposes.’

“‘And after three years there shall be no more famine nor hunger in the land”,’ Bao-chai intoned. (She had wandered

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off in the course of Tan-chun’s exposition and was examining some calligraphy on the wall.)

‘It’s a very good idea,’ said Li Wan. ‘If we could really do this, I’m sure Lady Wang would be pleased. It’s not so much the saving of money that’s important; but if there are going to be people whose special job is to look after the Garden *and* they are allowed to make a little money out of it as well, then what with “the allurement of status” on the one hand and “the incentive of gain” on the other, they are sure to make a good job of it.’

‘It needed you to suggest this, miss,’ said Patience. ‘My mistress *has* thought of something like this in the past, but she hasn’t liked to mention it to anyone, because she thought that now all you young ladies are living in the Garden you might feel that we ought to be spending more on it rather than less and if she had people snooping around in it making economies you might feel that that really was the last straw.’

Bao-chai walked over and began feeling Patience’s face:

‘Open your mouth, Patience: I want to see what your teeth are made of. Ever since early this morning you’ve been keeping up this tune. You never give Miss Tan credit for anything. You never admit that Mrs Lian is less than perfect and that there are things she may not have thought of. Whenever Miss Tan has finished saying something, you come back at her with the same refrain: your mistress has thought of that too, only for some compelling reason or other she hasn’t been able to do anything about it. This time you tell us that she didn’t like to save money by putting the Garden under supervision because of *us* living there.’

She turned to the others:

‘She’s right, of course. If you *do* hand this Garden over to a few of the old women to look after, they will naturally be unwilling that a single fruit or flower that they have charge over should be picked. Obviously where *we* are concerned they will not dare to say anything; but it is sure to prove a source of endless quarrelling with the maids. Patience is farseeing enough to realize this and, in her own inimitable way, without fear or flattery, she gives us warning. How tactful she is! Even if we weren’t on good terms with her mistress, I

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think after hearing Patience we should be shamed into making our peace with her!’

‘And I was so angry this morning,’ said Tan-chun. ‘When I heard that Patience had come, I suddenly thought of

her mistress and the insufferable behaviour of those henchwomen of hers - which she, no doubt, encourages and it made me even angrier. But Patience was so quiet and timid, like a poor little mouse that the cat has been after, and stood there all the time so meekly; and when she did speak, it was not to remind me of the many kindnesses that I owe her mistress, but to tell me that if I decided to make any changes, I should be doing her mistress a kindness which she was "sure she would appreciate". It really wrung my heart when she said that. Not only did I stop feeling angry then; I felt ashamed. "Here am I," I thought, "only a young girl, but behaving in such a way that nobody can ever like me or care what happens to me. When shall *I* ever be in a position to do anyone a kindness?"'

At this point her emotion got the better of her and she shed some tears. The others, moved by the sincerity with which she had spoken and remembering how Aunt Zhao was constantly maligning her and making things difficult for her with Lady Wang, were themselves moved to tears of sympathy; but they did their best to rally her.

'What better return can we possibly make Lady Wang for placing her trust in us,' said Li Wan, 'than to take advantage of the fact that things are a little quieter now by discussing some much-needed economies? What do you want to go bringing in an unimportant matter like that for?'

'I've got the gist of your plan, Miss,' said Patience. 'All you need do now is tell us which of the women you want to appoint and we can go straight ahead with it.'

'That's all very well,' said Tan-chun, 'but you ought to have a word with your mistress about it first. It was a bit presumptuous of us to go poking about and making these little economies in the first place - I should never have ventured to do so if I hadn't known that your mistress was so understanding: if she'd been a stupid or touchy person, she might have suspected me of trying to shine at her expense All the same, the very least we can do is to consult her first.'

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'Very well,' said Patience pleasantly. 'I'll go and tell her, then.'

She was gone for some time, but returned eventually, full of smiles:

'I knew it wasn't necessary to go. Of course she agrees. A good idea like this: how could she do otherwise?'

As soon as Tan-chun had received this confirmation, she and Li Wan sent for the list of women employed in the Garden. Bao-chai joined them in scrutinizing it and in making a provisional selection of those most likely to be suitable. These were summoned forthwith and Li Wan, addressing them in a group, outlined the scheme to them in general terms. The women were enthusiastic.

'Let me have the bamboo,' said one of them. 'I'll have double the amount growing within a year. I can keep you in bamboo-shoots for the kitchen and pay you an annual rent for it as well.'

'Let me have that bit of rice-paddy,' said another. 'I'll keep you in grain for your cage-birds so that you don't have to spend money on feed, *and* I'll pay you annual tent.'

Before Tan-chun could say anything, someone arrived with a message:

'The doctor's arrived. He's waiting to come into the Garden to have a look at Miss Shi.'

'Just a moment!' said Patience as the women went scurrying off to escort the doctor. 'There's no point in a *hundred* people going if there isn't anyone responsible to receive him.'

'Wu xin-deng's wife and Mrs Shan are already waiting for him at the Painted Gate on the south-west corner of the Garden,' said the woman who had brought the message.

When Patience heard that, she made no further objection. After the women had gone, Tan-chun looked at Bao-chai inquiringly:

'Well?'

Bac-chal laughed:

"'He who shows most enthusiasm in the beginning proves often to be a sluggard in the end; and he who promises the fairest is often thinking more of his profit than of his performance."'

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Tan-chun nodded in agreement and praised the aptness of the quotation. She turned to the register once more and pointed out a few more names for the other two to consider. Patience fetched a brush and inkstone for her to write with.

'Mamma Zhu is a very reliable body,' said the others of one of these. 'Her old man used to be a bamboo specialist and her son still is; it's in the family. She's the one we should put in charge of all the bamboos in the Garden. And Mamma Tian comes from a farming family. The farm at Sweet-rice Village may be only a plaything and not meant for serious cultivation, but if she were in charge of all those vegetable and paddy strips and doing the things that needed doing at the proper times, we should probably get a lot more out of it.'

'When you think of the amount of land that goes with them, it seems a pity that All-spice Court and **Green** Delights don't produce anything marketable,' said Tan-chun.

'Oh, but they do!' said Li Wan. 'Especially All-spice Court. Half the aromatics sold in perfumers' shops and on the herb stalls at markets and temple fairs come from plants like the ones grown in All-spice. I wouldn't be surprised if there were more profit to be had out of them than out of anything else that this Garden produces. And as for **Green** Delights: to mention nothing else, just look at all the flowers produced by that *rosa rugosa*

during the spring and summer months! And all the rambler roses and monthly roses and *rosa glabra* and honeysuckle and wistaria on the pergolas: think how much you could make out of them if the flowers were dried properly and sold to tea-merchants for flavouring!'
Tan-chun nodded enthusiastically.
'But,' she reflected, 'we haven't got anyone who knows the art of flower-drying, have we?'
'The mother of Miss Bao's maid Oriole knows all about that sort of thing,' said Patience. 'Don't you remember her drying a lot of flowers once and filling little baskets and gourds with them to make us presents?'
'Is this the thanks I get for praising you?' Bao-chai asked Patience.
'What *can* you mean?' said the others, in some surprise.

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You can't possibly give the job to her,' said Bao-chai. 'You have so many able and willing women of your own who won't be getting any of these jobs: they are going to think very poorly of me if they know that I am responsible for bringing in an outsider. I can think of someone that you *could* give this job to, though: Old Mamma Ye at **Green** Delights - Tealeaf's mother. She's a very honest old woman; and what's more, she is on very good terms with Oriole's mother. You'd much better give the job to her. She will probably consult Oriole's mother whenever there is anything she is not sure about in any case. She may even elect to hand over to her altogether. But that would be entirely a private matter between the two of them. The other servants might resent it, but at least they couldn't blame *u~* The advantage of this arrangement is that it would *look* fair as well as being effective.'
Li Wan and Patience agreed. Tan-chun was more sceptical:
'That may be; but what if cupidity proves stronger than friendship?'
'Not likely in this case,' said Patience. 'Only the other day Mamma Ye was invited to become Oriole's godmother. The three of them had a little party to celebrate. The two families are very close.'
Tan-chun dropped her objection and proceeded, with the others, to deliberate on the rest of their choices - all of them women whom the four of them had mentally noted in the past for their dependability. As each one's selection was confirmed, she made a little circle with her writing-brush against the corresponding name in the register.
Shortly after this the women arrived back again to report that the doctor had gone and to hand in the prescription he had left. After studying it, Li Wan, Tan-chun and Bao-chai sent one of the women to obtain the drugs from outside and to supervise the making-up and administering of the medicine. Then Li Wan and Tan-chun told the women which of them were to have the cultivation of which parts of the Garden and what the conditions of their tenure were to be:
'You will be expected to give us, in due season, a fixed amount of your crops for our own use; but apart from that it will be up to you to make whatever profit from them you can.

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Accounts will be submitted and dues paid at the end of the year.'
'I've been having second thoughts about that,' said Tan-chun. 'If you are submitting annual accounts and paying dues, presumably it will be to the Office. But that means another lot of people with control over you and another layer skimmed off your profits. Now in thinking up this new arrangement and appointing you ourselves, we are already in a sense going above their heads, which is sure to anger them. They probably won't dare to say anything about it now, but there will be nothing to stop them getting their own back later on when you go round to settle accounts with them at the end of the year. And there's another thing. If *they* are going to be in on this, they are sure to expect a share of the produce. Whatever you agree to give us in the course of each year, they will expect the equivalent of half the amount for themselves. That's an old, established rule. Everyone knows that. But since the new arrangement is *our* creation, *I* say let's keep it out of their hands altogether. If there's to be an annual settling of accounts, let it be done here, internally.'
'If you ask me,' said Bao-chai, I don't think there should be any settling of accounts at all. You'd always be finding that this one had too much and that one too little. It would only be a lot of extra trouble. Why not get each of them to take over some regular item of your expenditure and pay for it out of their profits? That will keep it all inside the Garden. I've just been running over in my mind what your regular expenses are. They aren't very many. There's hair-oil, cosmetics, incense, paper: every mistress and her maids get a fixed amount of those every month. Then there are brushes, dust-pans, feather-dusters and food for the livestock (birds, rabbits, deer and so forth). That's really all. Now suppose instead of drawing money from Accounts for all those things we gave these women the responsibility of paying for them:
how much do you reckon the saving would be?'
'They're small items in themselves,' said Patience, 'but I should think if you added them all together the total annual saving would be well over four hundred taels.'
'There you are I' said Bao-chai. 'Four hundred a year, eight

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hundred in two years: you could buy a small house for letting with that or add half an acre of poor farm4and to your landholdings. But though there should be quite a lot left over after they have covered the expenses we are assigning to them, we want them to have a little something to spend on themselves after working hard all through the year; and though, from our point of view, the main object of these operations is economy, we don't want to overdo it. There would be no point in saving an extra two or three hundred taels if it meant resorting to undignified methods in order to do so. What we are now proposing means that Accounts will be paying out four or five hundred taels a year less than they do now without anyone outside feeling the pinch. And as for inside, the women doing these jobs will be getting a little extra for themselves, the ones not doing them will be able to relax a bit, the Garden's stock of trees and flowers will thrive and increase through being better cared for, and *we* shall he better off when we have this regular supply of the produce for our own use - all this without any loss of dignity. Whereas if we went all out to economize with no other consideration but making money in mind, no doubt we should have little difficulty in squeezing more out, but the effect of paying everything back into the common account would be wails of protest from everyone, both inside the Garden and out, and a consequent loss of dignity that in a household like yours would be quite unacceptable.
'Altogether there must be several dozen old women working in this Garden. If you give the money-making jobs to these few here and leave the others out in the cold, the others are going to complain that it isn't fair. Now as I said, there's still going to be quite a lot of money left over when they've finished paying these various expenses for you, and I think we should be letting them off a bit too lightly if we let them keep *all* of it. Why don't we say that every year, no matter how much or how little they have made, they are to pay so many strings of cash into a common pool which will be shared out among all the other women? Although those others won't any longer have anything to do with the upkeep of the Garden, they are responsible, day and night, for keeping an eye on the

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other servants; they have the responsibility of opening and closing the gates, which means that they have to get up earlier and go to bed later than everyone else; and whenever any of us go out, whatever the weather, even if it is raining or snowing heavily, they have to carry sedans, punt boats, draw sledges - in fact do any heavy work that needs to be done. Since they work so hard in the Garden from one year's end to the next, it seems only fair that if any money is going to be made out of the Garden, they should have a share in it. And there's another reason for this, if it doesn't seem too petty-minded to mention it' - Bao-chai turned to the women to explain - 'If you think only of how much you can make out of this for yourselves and don't let the others have a share, they are sure to feel resentful even if they don't like to say anything and will try to make up for it by misappropriating what they can for their own use - filching a fruit here and a flower there whenever they have the opportunity. Whereas if they know in advance that they are going to get a share of whatever you make from your produce, they will be as anxious as you are that none of it is stolen and will even keep an eye on it for you when you aren't able to watch over it yourselves.'
The women were quick to see the force of this argument - no control by the Office, no settling of accounts with Xi-feng, only a few strings of cash to pay out every year. They were all of them delighted and accepted these conditions unanimously.
'Better than being pushed around by Accounts,' they said. 'If we were paying *them* anything, they'd want a dash on top of it for themselves.'
Those of the women present who were *not* getting one of the gardening jobs, when they heard that they were going to be given money at the end of every year without having to do anything to earn it, were, if anything, even more delighted -though for politeness' sake they pretended to demur:
'After all the hard work they'll be putting into it they *ought* to have a bit extra for themselves. Doesn't seem right that we should sit back and collect the jackpot without having to do anything for it!'

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'Don't refuse the offer,' said Bao-chai, smiling. 'It's no less than you deserve. As long as you continue to keep a close watch on things and don't get slack and allow people to drink and gamble. Otherwise it puts me in such an awkward position. This isn't really my business, of course; but as you have no doubt heard, my aunt has repeatedly urged me to take over responsibility for it on the grounds that Mrs Zhu is too busy and the other young ladles are too young to attend to it. I can't refuse her, knowing that to do so would be deliberately adding to her worries. She has such indifferent health and so many household cares and I have so little to do myself that even if she were only a neighbour and not my aunt, I could scarcely refuse to help her. It's no good worrying that I shall make myself unpopular. If I care only about being popular and allow people to drink and gamble as much as they like, sooner or later someone who has drunk too much will start a quarrel. If an incident like that were to happen, how should I be able to look my aunt in the face? And think what it would be like for you. You would have forfeited your reputation as responsible seniors that you have taken so many years to build up. After all, the reason all these dozens of maids and the whole of this great Garden have been placed under your supervision is because you have served here under three or four generations of masters and are

considered more dependable than any of the other servants. At a time when we all ought to be doing our best to keep up appearances, you will have allowed other people to drink and gamble. It will be bad enough if my aunt gets to hear of it and gives you a talking-to; but what if you are found out by the stewardesses and they decide to discipline you themselves without bothering to tell my aunt? What a disgrace, that people of your years should be punished by servants younger than yourselves They would be within their rights, of course. As stewardesses they have power over all other members of the staff. But how much better if you conducted yourselves in such a way that you could keep your self-respect and not be in a position where they had you at their mercy! That is why I have thought of this plan for bringing you in a little extra money. I am hoping that everyone will now collaborate to make this

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Garden such a model of discipline and good management that those who have the power to intervene, when they see how tight a discipline you are able to keep by yourselves, will decide that there is nothing for them to worry about and will respect you and leave you alone. Then we shall feel that the trouble we have taken in planning this little extra income for you was justified. Think about it!'

The women were all smiles of pleasure:

'You're right, Miss Bao. Don't worry, Mrs Zhu and young ladies both! We should be lost souls indeed if we didn't show a bit of consideration for you after you have been so kind and thoughtful to us!'

At that moment Lin Zhi-xiao's wife came in:

'The Zhen family from Nanking arrived in town yesterday. Today they have gone to the Palace to offer their felicitations. Some of their people have just arrived here to pay their respects. They have brought presents with them.'

She held out the list of presents with both hands. Tan-chun took it from her and ran her eye over it:

Imperial use decorated satins and *mang* satins	12 lengths	
Imperial use satins, various		12 lengths
Imperial use gauzes, in different shades		12 lengths
Imperial use Palace taffetas		12 lengths
Official use satins, gauzes, taffetas and damasks in	various colours	24 lengths

When Li Wan too had seen the list, she told Lin Zhi-xiao's wife to use the largest size of gratuity packet for tipping the bearers with. She also sent someone to report to Grandmother Jia, who sent word back that Li Wan, Tan-chun and Bao-chai were to come over and inspect the presents. After they had done so, Li Wan told the women in charge of the store-room to wait until Lady Wang had got back and had a look at them before putting them into store.

'The Zhens are rather special people,' said Grandmother Jia. 'You had better use one of the largest gratuity packets when you are tipping the bearers. And you'd better get some cloth-lengths ready: I expect we shall have some of their women arriving shortly, to pay their respects.'

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The words were scarcely out of her mouth when the arrival of four women from the Zhen household was announced. Grandmother Jia at once gave orders that they should be brought in. All four were sober matrons of forty years or more and so genteelly dressed that it would have been impossible to guess from their appearance that they were servants. When the formal salutations and the inquiries after Grandmother Jia's health had been completed, the old lady called for footstools to be brought for them to sit on. They acknowledged the courtesy but waited until Bao-chai and the others were seated before they would sit down themselves. When Grandmother Jia asked them when they had arrived in town, they stood up again to reply:

'We arrived yesterday. Today Her Ladyship has had to take our young lady to the Palace, so she has sent us to offer you her respects and ask after the young ladies.'

'It's many years since they have been to the capital,' said Grandmother Jia. 'It's rather unexpected, that they should suddenly turn up like this.'

The women smiled:

'Yes, madam. They had an Imperial Summons to come this year.'

'Have they *all* come?' said Grandmother Jia.

'No, madam. Her Old Ladyship and the young master and our fourth and fifth young ladies and the other ladles all stayed at home. Only Her Ladyship and our third young lady have accompanied the Master on this journey.'

'Is your third young lady betrothed yet?' said Grandmother Jia.

'No, madam, not yet.'

'Your first and second young ladies both. married into families on very good terms with ours,' said Grandmother Jia.

'Yes, madam,' said the spokeswoman. 'Every year when they write home they tell us how much they are beholden to you for your kind concern.'

Grandmother Jia laughed deprecatingly:

'One could hardly call it that. Our families have known each other for so long *and* we are connected by marriage: it's

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only right that we should take an interest in them. We are particularly fond of your second young lady. She is so unassuming, in spite of her rank. I think I could say, without offence, that we have grown quite attached to her.'

The women laughed:

'You are too polite, madam.'

Grandmother Jia pursued her questioning:

'Your young master lives with his grandmother, then?'

'Yes, madam.'

'How old is he? Has he started school yet?'

'Thirteen this year,' said the woman. 'He *has* started school, but he is always playing truant. He has always been naughty, since he was little. He's a good-looking boy, though, and his grandmother's favourite, so there's not much his father and mother can do about it.'

Grandmother Jia was greatly diverted.

'Just like us! And what is his name?'

'Well, because she says he is her "treasure" and because he has such a milky-white complexion, his grandmother calls him "Bao-yu". That means "Precious Jade", you see.'

Grandmother Jia turned to Li Wan, laughing:

'Fancy that! He's even *called* Bao-yu, too.'

Li Wan inclined politely

'Coincidences over names have always been common, whether among contemporaries or among people of different periods.'

'We did wonder, after he was given this name, whether there wasn't some family of our acquaintance in the capital in which the name had already been used,' said the woman; 'but as it was ten or more years since we'd been there, we couldn't remember for sure whether there was or not.'

'It's my grandson's name,' said Grandmother Jia. 'Come here, someone.'

'Hei!' shouted the womenservants in attendance, and a few of them stepped forward.

'Go over to the Garden and tell our Bao-yu to come here so that our visitors can have a look at him and tell us how he compares with *their* Bao-yu.'

The women hurried off in obedience to her order and

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returned after ten minutes or so with Bao-yu in their midst. When the four women from the Zhen household saw him enter, they hurriedly rose to their feet.

'You gave us quite a turn,' they said. 'If we hadn't been here and had met you in some other place, we'd have thought that our own Bao-yu must have followed after to join us!'

They took him by the hand and made much of him, plying him with all sorts of questions. Bao-yu smiled back at them and greeted them politely.

'Well, how does he compare with yours?' Grandmother Jia asked them.

'It would appear that the two Bao-yus are very like each other from what they have already said,' Li Wan remarked.

'I doubt such a coincidence is possible,' said Grandmother Jia. 'Children of the upper classes, especially if they are reared delicately and provided they are not pock-marked or ill-favoured, are all much of a muchness as far as good looks are concerned. There would be nothing remarkable in a slight resemblance between them.'

'In appearance he is exactly like our Bao-yu,' said the women; 'but though Your Ladyship was saying just now that he is mischievous, I think your Bao-yu must be better-tempered than ours.'

'Oh?' said Grandmother Jia, immediately interested. 'Why do you think that?'

'Because he let us hold his hand just now when we talked to him. If it had been *our* young gentleman, he would have called us "old fools". We are not allowed to lay a finger on any of his things even, let alone take him by the hand. The only servants he will have about him are young girls -'

Before they could go on, Li Wan, Tan-chun and Bao-chai had burst out laughing. Grandmother Jia was laughing too:

'I'm sure that if I were to send some of my women to see your Bao-yu now and they took *him* by the hand, he would somehow or other contrive to put up with it. Children brought up in families like ours, no matter how odd or eccentric they may be, will always conduct themselves in a courteous, well-bred manner in the presence of strangers. Otherwise their eccentricity would not be tolerated. In fact, the reason why

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grown-ups are so fond of them, though partly because of their good looks, is mainly because their beautiful

manners - much better than many a grown-up's - make it such a pleasure to be with them. No one meeting them can help liking them, and that makes us more tolerant of what they do on their own, when they are out of sight. But if they were to carry on in exactly the same way all the time, never allowing the grown-ups to get a word in edgeways, they would be fit for nothing but a whipping.'
'That's true, madam,' said the women, smiling. 'Although our Bao-yu is so odd and mischievous, he can at times, when he is with visitors, behave himself better than a grown-up, so that it's a pleasure to watch him. No one who meets him can help liking him. Often they ask us what his father should want to beat him for, not realizing what a holy terror he can be inside the family. Sir Zhen and Lady Zhen are driven half distracted by him. If it were just his wilfulness, which is fairly normal in a child, it could be cured in time; so could his extravagance, which is normal in the sons of well-to-do people; and so could his hatred of study, which again is fairly normal in a young person. But this weird perverseness of his seems to be inbred: there seems to be no cure for it.'

Just then Lady Wang's return was announced. She went straight up to Grandmother Jia on entering and saluted her, after which she received the salutations of the four visitors and exchanged a few words with them.

'You are tired,' said Grandmother Jia. 'Go and rest'

Lady Wang served her mother-in-law with some tea before withdrawing to her own apartment. Shortly after she had gone, the four women took their leave of Grandmother Jia and went to join her. Lady Wang chatted with them for a while about family affairs before sending them on their way - suitably primed, of course, with messages and gratuities: but those are details which need not concern us.

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Greatly tickled by what the women had told her, Grandmother Jia, for some time after their visit) would announce to anyone who came to see her:

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There is another Bao-yu, you know, exactly like our Bao-yu in every particular.'
The other memhers of the family, bearing in mind that the world was a large place and instances of the same name among its innumerable upper-class families probably of not very rare occurrence, and that a grandmother who doted on her grandson was a fairly unremarkable phenomenon, were unimpressed by the coincidence and gave little thought to it. But Bao-yu, convinced, like many another young gentleman, of his own uniqueness, dismissed what the four women had said as a fabrication designed to give pleasure to his grandmother. He was taunted about it by Xiang-yun when he visited her in her sick-room in the Garden to see how she was getting on.
'You'll be able to get up to all sorts of mischief now,' she said. 'Previously it was a case of

The single strand makes not a thread Nor the single tree a wood.

We thought there was only one of you. But now you know you are a pair, there will be no stopping you. If your father beats you really badly, you can always run off to Nanking and get this other Bao-yu to stand in for you!'
'You don't believe that rubbish, do you?' said Bao-yu. 'How *could* there be another Bao-yu?'
'There was a Lin Xiang-ru in the Warring States period and a Si-ma Xiang-ru under the Former Han,' said Xiang-yun.
'Yes, but this one's supposed to *look* the same as well,' said Bao-yu. 'That's not something you can find precedents for, surely?'
'What about when the men of Kuang mistook Confucius for Yang Huo?' said Xiang-yun.
Confucius and Yang Huo may have looked the same,' said Bao-yu, 'but they didn't have the same name. Lin xiangru and Si-ma Xiang-ru had the same name but they didn't look alike. We are supposed both to have the same name and to look the same. It isn't possible.'
Xiang-yun, unable to think of a reply, took the easy way out.

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'Pleathe yourthelf. Whether it is or whether it isn't, it's of no concern to me.'
And she lay back on the bed and closed her eyes.
But Bao-yu's confidence was shaken. Had he a double? When he told himself that he couldn't possibly, he now began to feel that perhaps after all he had. On the other hand how could he be sure that he had when he had never seen him? Brooding on this uncertainty, he went back to his room and lay down on his bed to ponder it in silence. Soon he had drifted into sleep.
He was in a garden, which, he remarked with surprise, bore some resemblance to Prospect Garden. While he was still puzzling over the similarity, he became aware that some girls were coming towards him, all of them maids. Again he was surprised:
'Strange that there should be another lot of maids here like Faithful and Aroma and Patience!'

He observed that they were laughing at him:
'Bao-yu, what are you doing here?'
Bao-yu, naturally supposing that they meant him, smiled back at them:
'I've strayed in here by accident. I think this garden must belong to some friend or other of my family. Won't you take me with you and show me round it?'
'It isn't our Bao-yu after all,' said the girls. 'He's not bad-looking, though, and he *sounds* reasonably intelligent.'
'Tell me,' said Bao-yu eagerly, 'is there another Bao-yu here then?'
'Bao-yu?' rejoined one of the girls sharply. *'We* have Her Old Ladyship's and Her Ladyship's orders to use that name as much as possible as a means of bringing him luck and Bao-yu likes to hear us use it; but what business has a boy like you from some remote place outside to be making free with it? Don't let them catch you doing that here, *boy* or they'll flay your backside for you!'
'Come, let's be going,' said another. 'We don't want Bao- yu to see him.'
'Don't let's stand here talking to the nasty creature,' said a third. 'We shall be contaminated!'

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And they hurried off.
Bao-yu was nonplussed
'No one has ever been as horrid as that to me before. I wonder why they are? And I wonder if there really *is* another person exactly like me here.'
As he mused on the unaccountable hostility of the maids, his feet were carrying him along in no particular direction and presently he found himself inside a courtyard. He looked around him in some surprise:
'Strange! There's even a place like **Green** Delights here.'
He mounted the steps of the verandah and walked inside the building. Someone was lying there on a bed. On the other side of the room were some maids, some of them sewing, some of them giggling over a game they were playing. Presently the person on the bed - it was a youth - could he heard to sigh and one of the maids laughingly inquired what he was sighing for.
'Aren't you asleep, Bao-yu? I suppose you are worried about your cousin's illness again and imagining all sorts of foolish things about her.'
Bao-yu heard this with some astonishment. He listened while the youth on the bed replied:
'I heard Grandmother say that there is another Bao-yu in the capital who is exactly like me, but I didn't believe her. I've just been having a dream in which I went into a large garden and met some girls there who called me a "nasty creature" and wouldn't have anything to do with me. I managed to find this Bao-yu's room, but he was asleep. What I saw was only an empty shell lying there on the bed. I was wondering where the real person could have got to.'
'I came *here* looking for Bao-yu. Are *you* Bao-yu then?' Bao-yu could not help blurting out.
The youth leaped down from the bed and seized Bao-yu by the hands:
'So *you* are Bao-yu, and this isn't a dream after all?'
'Of course it isn't a dream,' said Bao-yu. 'It couldn't be more real!'
Just then someone arrived with a summons:
'The Master wants to see Bao-yu.'

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For a moment the two Bao-yus were stunned; and then one Bao-yu hurried off and the other Bao-yu was left calling after him:
'Come back, Bao-yu! Come back, Bao-yu!'
Aroma heard him calling his own name in his sleep and shook him awake.
'Where's Bao-yu ?' she asked him jokingly.
Though awake, Bao-yu had not yet regained consciousness of his surroundings. He pointed to the doorway:
'He's only just left. He can't have got very far.'
'You're still dreaming,' Aroma said, amused. 'Rub your eyes and have another look. That's the mirror. You're looking at your own reflection in the mirror.'
Bao-yu leaned forward and looked The doorway he had pointed to was his dressing-mirror. He joined Aroma in laughing at himself.
Seeing him awake, maids were already at hand with a spittoon and a cup of strong tea for him to rinse his mouth with. Musk recalled Grandmother Jia's strictures against young people having too many mirrors around them.
'She says that when you're young your soul isn't fully formed yet, and if you're reflected in mirrors too often, it can give your soul a shock which causes you to have bad dreams. Fancy putting your bed right in front of that great mirror! It's all right as long as it's kept covered, but sometimes when you've been out to the front, especially in hot weather when you're feeling tired, they forget to cover it. That's what must have happened just now. And you must have been looking at yourself in it before you dropped off to sleep. That would be a sure way of bringing on a bad dream. And it would explain why you were calling your own name out in your sleep.

Let's move this bed inside, away from the mirror, for goodness sake!'

Just then a message arrived for Bao-yu from Lady Wang saying that she wanted to see him.

But as to what it was she wanted to see him about: that will be revealed in the chapter which follows.

CHAPTER 57

Nightingale tests Jade Boy with a startling message
And Aunt Xue comforts Frowner with
words of loving kindness

Obedient to the summons, Bao-yu hurried from the Garden and over to his mother's apartment. It appeared that she was about to pay a call on Lady Zhen and wanted to take him with her. Bao-yu was delighted and hurried back again to get changed.

The Zhens' town house was very much like the Ning and Rong establishments - if anything, a shade more opulent. In answer to Bao-yu's questioning, Lady Zhen assured him that there was indeed a Bao-yu in Nanking. She kept the two of them to dinner and they stayed there for the rest of the day. Bao-yu was at last convinced.

As soon as they got back in the evening, Lady Wang made arrangements for entertaining Lady Zhen. A first-class dinner was ordered, a well-known troupe of adult players engaged, and Lady Zhen and her daughter were invited to come over next day. The day after that mother and daughter left town. They had no time for farewells: Sir Zhen had been ordered back to his post.

It was on the day of their departure that Bao-yu, after visiting Xiang-yun and finding that she was distinctly on the mend, went over to see how Dai-yu was getting on, only to be told that she was taking her afternoon nap. Nightingale chanced to be sitting outside in the covered walk doing some sewing, so, not wishing to disturb Dai-yu, he went over to talk to Nightingale instead.

'How was she last night? Is her cough any better?'

'Yes, a bit better,' said Nightingale.

'Thank the Lord for that!' said Bao-yu fervently. 'If only she could shake it off altogether!'

Nightingale looked up at him with amusement:

'It's not often we hear *you* calling on the Lord.'

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Bao-yu returned her smile:

'Any doctor will do in an emergency.'

His eye took in her costume as he said this: a cotton-padded dress of thin black-and-white material with only a lined black satin waistcoat over the top of it. He reached out his hand to feel it.

'What you're wearing is much too thin for this time of year. You're sitting in a draught here as well. If *you* go sick too, things here will be in a pretty pickle!'

'Look,' said Nightingale sharply, 'let's just *talk* to each other in future, shall we, without any of this pawing about? Now that we're all beginning to grow up, it creates such a bad impression. However much that horrible lot over there say things about you behind your back, you still carry on the same as when you were little. It *won't do*. Miss Lin has warned us time and again about getting into conversations with you. Look at the way she behaves towards you herself nowadays: she can't keep far enough away from you.'

She rose to her feet as she said this and moved, with her sewing, into the house.

The effect of this rebuff on Bao-yu's feelings was as if a bowl of icy water had been emptied over him. For some moments he was stunned and stood gazing stupidly at the clump of bamboos that were growing in front of him; then, as he became gradually aware that Mamma Zhu, to whose expert care they had been entrusted, was rooting about in their midst, he took himself off, but still in a daze, and scarcely aware what he was doing. Presently he sat down on a rock somewhere to think. Tears rolled down his cheeks, but he did not feel them. For an hour or more he continued to sit there motionless, turning the same question, 'What am I to do?', over and over in his mind, but never reaching a conclusion.

Snowgoose, sent on an errand to fetch ginseng from Lady Wang's, passed by him on her way back. As she glanced sideways from the path, she saw a figure sitting motionless on a rock underneath a peach-tree, chin cupped in hand and evidently lost in thought, which she recognized, with some surprise, as Bao-yu.

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‘It’s ever so cold,’ she thought: ‘what can he be doing, all on his own out here? They say that sickly people are specially liable to catch things in spring. Perhaps he’s gone mental.’
She went over to where he was sitting and, squatting down in front of him, peered smilingly into his face.
‘What are you doing out here?’
Bao-yu noticed her with a start.
‘Why do you come up to me like this? You’re a girl, aren’t you? She’s told you all not to have anything to do with me, for fear of creating a scandal; so why do you still come up to me? If we’re seen here talking together) there’ll only be more gossip. Go back home!’
Snowgoose assumed that Dai-yu had been upsetting him and continued on her way. When she got back to the Naiad’s House, Dai-yu was still asleep, so she gave the ginseng to Nightingale.
‘What was Her Ladyship doing?’ Nightingale asked her.
‘She was having an afternoon nap, too. That’s why I was so long. I’ll tell you something that will make you laugh, Night. While I was sitting in the servants’ room talking to Silver and waiting for Her Ladyship to get up, who should look in but Mrs Zhao, and beckoned me over to her. And do you know what she wanted? They’re burying her brother tomorrow and she’s got leave from Her Ladyship to go there for the wake. Young Fortune’s going with her, and she said Fortune hasn’t got anything to wear, would I please lend her my pale-**blue** dress? Well, I thought to myself, Fortune’s got just as many dresses as I have; the only reason she wants to borrow someone else’s is because she’s too mean to let her wear her own there and risk getting it dirtied. I wouldn’t mind lending it to her - even if she dirtied it, it wouldn’t matter all that much - but what has *she* ever done for us? So I said, “Miss Lin told me to hand all my clothes and jewellery to Nightingale to look after. I should have to see Nightingale about it first, and I should have to tell Miss Lin. It might take rather a long time. I might not be able to get it to you before you go,” I said. “Perhaps it would be safer to borrow someone else’s.”‘
Nightingale laughed.
‘You’re an artful little minx, aren’t you? You don’t want

to lend her your dress, but you take very good care that it’s me and Miss Lin that get blamed for refusing it, and not you. Is Mrs Zhao going now, then, or first thing tomorrow?’

‘Now,’ said Snowgoose. ‘She’s probably already left.’

Nightingale nodded.

‘It looks as if Miss Lin’s still asleep,’ said Snowgoose. ‘If it wasn’t her, I wonder who it was that made Bao-yu so upset. He was sitting Out there in the Garden crying.’

‘Oh?’ said Nightingale sharply. ‘Where?’

‘Under that peach-tree behind Drenched Blossoms Pavilion.’

Nightingale hurriedly put down her sewing and stood up. ‘You take over in case she calls. If she wants me, tell her I’ll be back directly.’

She sped off to look for Bao-yu. There was a reassuring smile on her face as she came up to him.

‘That was only a harmless little remark I made, and it was only for your own and everyone else’s good. Why did you need to get in such a passion and go rushing off to sit in the wind here and cry? Suppose you were to get ill as a result of this.’

Immediately Bao-yu was his smiling self once more:

‘I wasn’t in a passion. I thought what you said was very reasonable. What upset me was the thought that if *you* felt that way, then other people must feel that way too, in which case soon *everyone* would stop having anything to do with me.’

Nightingale sat down companionably at his side.

‘A short while ago you moved away from me when I was standing opposite you,’ said Bao-yu. ‘Now, apparently, it is all right to sit close beside me.’

‘I suppose you’ve forgotten the time when you and Miss Lin were talking together and Mrs Zhao burst in on you,’ said Nightingale. ‘That was what made me careful. Now I’ve just heard that she’s away, so it’s quite safe. Incidentally, there’s something about that occasion I’ve always wanted to ask you. You were about to say something about bird’s nest when she came in but didn’t have a chance to finish; and you’ve never referred to it since.’

‘Oh, it was nothing important,’ said Bao-yu. ‘It’s just that

once you start taking bird’s nest, you’ve got to keep it up, and it seemed to me that as Cousin Bao is really here as our guest, it would be rather boorish to keep asking *her* for more; on the other hand it would be rather awkward to have to ask Lady Wang for it; so I dropped a hint to Grandma, and I rather think that she had a word on the subject with Feng. That’s all I was going to tell Dai when we were interrupted. I’ve since heard that you’re getting an ounce a day regularly, so there hasn’t seemed any need to mention it.,

‘Oh, so it was *you* who told her about it,’ said Nightingale. ‘In that case we owe you our thanks. We couldn’t think what it was that could have suddenly put it into her head.’
‘She should take it regularly, every day,’ said Bao-yu. ‘If she can keep it up for two or three years, she should get completely better.’
‘It’s easy enough now,’ said Nightingale, ‘but where will she find the money for it next year, when she goes home?’
Bao-yu was startled.
‘When who goes home? What home?’
‘When your Cousin Dai goes back to Soochow.’
Bao-yu laughed:
‘You’re joking. Soochow is where her father came from, I know. But the reason we brought her here in the first place was because when my Aunt Lin died there was no one to look after her. There wouldn’t be anyone in Soochow for her to go to. You *must* be lying.’
‘How arrogant you are I’ said Nightingale scornfully. ‘I suppose you think yours is the only big family in the world. According to you, I suppose, other people only have fathers and mothers: they couldn’t possibly have uncles and aunts on their father’s side like you do. As a matter of fact, when Miss Lin came here it wasn’t because there weren’t any relations of her father’s that she could have gone to; it was because Her Old Ladyship was afraid that being so little she might not be as happy with them as she would with her mother’s folk. But it was only ever her intention to keep her here for a few years. As soon as she’s old enough to be married, she’ll have to go back to the Lin family. You could hardly expect a Lin family girl to spend the rest of her days among Jias, now

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could you? The Lins may be too poor to afford a square meal, but they are people of education. They’d never sink so low as to hand over responsibility for one of their own number to their marriage-kin. Next year - next spring at the earliest, but certainly not later than next autumn - either your family will send her back to them or the Lins themselves will come here to fetch her. Miss Lin was talking to me about it only the other night. She said I was to ask you to get together all the little presents she’s ever given you and send them back to her, and she’ll do the same with yours.’
To Bao-yu these words were like a thunderclap exploding immediately overhead. Nightingale waited to see how he would reply, but he made no sound. Growing at last impatient, she was about to speak to him again when Skybright appeared. She had been looking for him everywhere, she said. He was wanted by his grandmother.
‘He’s been here all this time talking about Miss Lin’s ill-ness,’ said Nightingale. ‘I keep telling him how she is, but he won’t believe me. If you want him to go with you, you’ll have to take hold of him and *make* him go.’
She left then, without waiting to see more.
Skybright noticed Bao-yu’s vacant expression. His forehead was beaded with sweat and there was a **red,** inflamed look about his face. She seized him by the hand and hurried him back to **Green** Delights.
Aroma was naturally alarmed to see Bao-yu come back in such a state, but attributed it to the weather: it was an in-clement spring and he had gone out while overheated and exposed himself to the wind. But it soon became apparent that feverishness was the least serious of his symptoms. His eyes had a fixed and glassy stare, a little trickle of saliva ran from each corner of his mouth, and he seemed to have lost all consciousness of what he was doing: when they brought him a pillow he lay down; when they pulled him by the hand he sat up again; when they handed him a cup of tea he drank it; but all with the mechanical movements of an automaton. The maids, when they saw this, were in a panic; but not daring to report yet to Grandmother Jia, they first sent for Nannie Li to tell them what was wrong.

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Nannie Li came promptly. Before she did anything else, she spent a good long while simply observing him. Then she asked him a few questions, but he made no reply. Then she took his wrist in her hand and felt his pulse. Finally, taking the raphe of his lip between her thumb and finger, she pinched it a couple of times, so hard that a deep imprint was made by her nails: yet he seemed to feel nothing.
‘Lord a mercy!’ cried the old woman in a pathetic voice, and clinging to his body, she set up a howl and wept.
Aroma, beside herself with anxiety, tugged imploringly at her sleeve:
‘Nannie, Nannie, have another look at him and tell us how serious it is, so that we know what to say to Their Ladyships. Don’t just cry!’
Nannie Li hammered the bed with her fists:
‘It’s all up with him, I tell you. All the heartache I’ve had on account of him was wasted.’
Aroma and the girls who, whatever else they might think of Nannie Li, respected her age and experience, assumed that she must know what she was talking about and all began crying too.
Skybright now told Aroma the circumstances in which she had found Bao-yu. Without a moment’s hesitation Aroma flew over to the Naiad’s House, arriving just as Nightingale was giving Dai-yu her medicine. Wasting no time on civility, she stalked straight up to Nightingale and confronted her there and then.

‘What did you say just now to our Bao-yu? Just go and take a look at him, will you, then go and tell Her Old Lady ship, because *I* won’t be responsible.’
She concluded by sitting down rudely in a chair.
The sight of Aroma, with her angry, tear-stained face, behaving in a way that was so utterly uncharacteristic of her, filled Dai-yu with alarm.
‘What is it?’
Aroma made an effort to control herself and answered tearfully:
‘I don’t know what Her Ladyship here can have said to him, but that simpleton of ours just stares into space without speaking, his hands and feet are icy-cold, and when Nannie

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Li pinches him, he doesn’t seem to feel anything. He looked half dead when I left. Even Nannie Li said it was all up with him. She’s over there wailing for him now. He may be already dead for all I know.’
To Dai-yu, as to the girls, Nannie Li, for all her failings, was an old woman whose words carried the weight of experience. If she said it was all up with Bao-yu, it must be all up with him. There was a horrible sickening sound as she vomited up the medicine she had just taken, followed by a dreadful paroxysm of silent coughing that seemed to rack every nerve and fibre of her body. She coughed until her face was **scarlet** and her hair was in disorder, until her eyes bulged and the veins stood out on her forehead, coughed until she was so breathless that she was unable to lift her face up from the bed. Nightingale at once began thumping her, but Dai-yu raised herself with an effort from the pillow and, after struggling for some moments to regain her breath, pushed her away:
‘Don’t do that. Get a rope and strangle me - that would be kinder!’
‘But I didn’t say *anything*,’ Nightingale protested. ‘I was only joking. He must have taken me seriously.’
‘Surely you know better by now than to joke with him?’ said Aroma. ‘He’s such a fool, he always takes everything seriously.’
‘Whatever it was you said to him,’ said Dai-yu, ‘you’d better go over there straight away and unsay it. That might bring him back to his senses.’
Nightingale climbed hurriedly off the bed and accompanied Aroma to **Green** Delights. Unfortunately Grandmother Jia and Lady Wang were also there when they arrived. At the sight of Nightingale, Grandmother Jia’s eyes flashed angrily.
‘Wicked creature! What did you say to him?’
‘I didn’t say anything,’ said Nightingale. ‘I was only pulling his leg.’
There was a sudden ‘Aiya!’ from the bed. It was Bao-yu, who had just caught sight of Nightingale and who now, to everyone’s relief, burst into tears.
Grandmother Jia seized hold of Nightingale and thrust her towards him. She supposed that Nightingale had offended

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Bao-yu in some way and that he would find relief in beating her. To her surprise, instead of doing any such thing, he clung to her imploringly:
‘If you’re going, take me with you!’
No one could make head or tall of this until Nightingale had been questioned and explained to them the nature of her hoax.
‘So that’s all it was!’ said Grandmother Jia in tears. ‘And I was thinking it must be something serious!’ She chided Nightingale, but less unkindly now: ‘You’re normally such a sensible girl. Surely you know he’s inclined to be a bit simple at times? What on earth possessed you to tease him like that?’
Aunt Xue urged a less serious view of Bao-yu’s derangement:
‘It’s true that he is a simple-hearted child; but his Cousin Lin came here when they were both little and they have grown up together and are closer to each other than any of the other children. I think you would *expect* him to be upset, suddenly out of the **blue** like that being told that she was going away. Never mind a simple-hearted child, I should think even a sophisticated grown-up would be! This isn’t a serious illness, Lady Jia. I’m sure you and my sister have no reason to feel worried. A dose or two of medicine and he’ll be perfectly all right again.’
Just at that moment the wives of Lin Zhi-xiab and Lai Da were announced, ‘come to see how the young master was’.
‘How thoughtful of them!’ said Grandmother Jia. ‘Tell them to come in.
But at the sound of the name ‘Lin’ Bao-yu began threshing about wildly on the bed, calling out that the Lins had come to fetch Dai-yu and insisting that they should be sent away.
‘Yes, send them away,’ said Grandmother Jia, while at the same time she did her best to soothe him: ‘There, there, there. That wasn’t anyone from the Lin family. The Lins all died out long ago. There aren’t any of them left to fetch her. Don’t worry!’
‘I don’t care who it was,’ said Bao-yu. ‘I don’t want any Lins here, apart from Cousin Lin.’
‘There aren’t any Lins here,’ said Grandmother Jia. ‘All the Lins in this place have been sent away.’

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She turned to the servants:

'In future Lin Zhi-xlao's wife is not to be allowed inside the Garden. And I don't want the word "Lin" to pass your lips even. Is that clearly understood, everyone?'

'Yes, madam,' the servants replied in chorus, not daring to laugh.

Presently Bao-yu's eye chanced to light on a little metal self-propelling boat - a West Ocean toy - which stood on one of the alcove shelves in the carved partition. Immediately he became excited again.

'Look!' he said, pointing, 'the ship that's come to fetch her - that's where they've docked it, over there.'

At a hurried order from his grandmother, Aroma took it down from the shelf. He held his hand out to receive it, and as soon as it was in his possession, hid it under the quilt, chuckling with satisfaction as he did so:

'They won't get away now!'

All this time he continued to hold tightly on to Nightingale with his other hand.

The doctor's arrival was announced and Grandmother Jia gave orders that he should be brought in immediately. Lady Wang, Aunt Xue and the girls withdrew into the inner room. Grandmother Jia herself continued to sit beside Bao-yu on the edge of the bed. As her attendants also remained, there were a good many people in the room when the doctor entered. It was Dr Wang. He paid his respects to the old lady before proceeding to take Bao-yu's pulse, mystified by the presence of a shame-faced Nightingale, who, unable to leave Bao-yu's side, could only stand there and hang her head.

After feeling the pulse for a while, Dr Wang rose to his feet.

'The young gentleman is suffering from a delirium caused by a phlegmatic occlusion of the cardiac orifices. The ancients recognized three main types of this form of dementia: in the first type the delirium is associated with an anaemic deficiency, when the body is failing to absorb its nourishment; in the second, it is brought on by some violent emotional disturbance, such as anger; in the third, the occlusion occurs as a result of shock. This is a delirium of the third type. In this

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type, fortunately, the occlusion is only a temporary one, so it is less serious than the other two.'

'Just tell us whether it's dangerous or not,' said Grand mother Jia. 'We're not asking you for a treatise on medicine.'

Dr Wang laughed deprecatingly and bowed:

'He'll be all right.'

'Will he *really* be all right?'

'Unquestionably,' said the doctor. 'I give you my word for it.

'Very well,' said Grandmother Jia. 'Then perhaps you will go outside now and write your prescription. If he recovers, I promise you a handsome reward, and Bao-yu himself shall bring it to you and kotow to you when he brings it. But if he *doesn't* get better, I shall have the main hall of the College of Physicians pulled down about your ears!'

'How kind! How kind!' The doctor, bowing and smiling at the prospect of a 'handsome reward' and Bao-yu kotowing at his feet, could not have heard the threat which followed, for he continued to say 'How kind!' after it had been uttered and left the room pursued by a wave of laughter.

The medicine he prescribed was soon concocted and Bao-yu did, after taking it, become a good deal calmer. But he would not release Nightingale.

'If she goes,' he said, 'I shall know that they are leaving for Soochow.'

Grandmother Jia and Lady Wang saw that there was nothing for it but to let Nightingale stay with him. Amber was sent to look after Dai-yu in her place. Dai-yu's other maid, Snowgoose, was kept busy running to and fro for news of Bao-yu's condition. By evening this was sufficiently improved for Grandmother Jia and the other visitors to feel that they could return to their own apartments. They continued to inquire after him by messenger, however, throughout the course of the night.

Nannie Li came again, bringing Mamma Song and several other old nannies to help watch over him. Nightingale, Aroma, Skybright and Musk kept up a constant vigil at his bedside throughout the night. From time to time Bao-yu would drop off, but invariably he would wake up with a start from some

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dream and tearfully announce to them either that Dai-yu had already gone or that people had come to take her away. Each time this happened Nightingale was the only one who could calm him. Grandmother Jia had sent over various nostrums -pills and powders she had heard recommended as sovereign specifics in cases of mental disorder - and they used these to dose him with when he woke up.

Next day, after another dose of Dr Wang's medicine, Bao- yu was distinctly better. His mind was clear

now, but because he did not wish to lose Nightingale yet, he pretended that it was still affected. Nightingale regretted what she had done and bore the antics of this pseudo-madman and the weariness of waiting on him both night and day with uncomplaining fortitude.

'It's only right that you should have to nurse him, seeing that you were the one who set him off,' said Aroma, relieved that Bao-yu was only play-acting. 'You should have known better. He's a case, this young master of ours. Tell him the wind's blowing on a fine day, and next minute he can hear the rain! Heighho! What he'll be like when he's grown up doesn't bear thinking of!'

But she did not pursue the subject.

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Xiang-yun had by now recovered completely and could drop in daily to see how Bao-yu was progressing. As soon as he seemed normal, she treated them all to an imitation of his madness. Her mimicry was so droll that even Bao-yu had to laugh, shamefacedly, into his pillow. He had no recollection of what he had been like when it all started and now, when they told him, he did not believe them.

Once, when no one was about, he took Nightingale's hand in his own and drew her to him.

'Why did you scare me like that?'

'I was pulling your leg,' said Nightingale. 'It was only a joke, but you took it seriously.'

'That was no joke,' said Bao-yu. 'It was too well-reasoned.'

Nightingale laughed.

'I made it all up. There's no Lin family - leastways, if there

is, they're very, very distant relations, and not in Soochow, either, but scattered all over the place, in different provinces. And even if one of them did come to take her away, Her Old Ladyship would never let her go.'

'*I* wouldn't, even if *she* did,' said Bao-yu.

'I wonder,' said Nightingale. 'I think you're only saying that. You're not a child any longer now. You're already betrothed. Another two or three years, when you're married, you won't have time for anyone else.'

Bao-yu heard her with astonishment.

'Betrothed? To whom?'

Just before New Year I heard Her Old Ladyship say that she was betrothing you to Miss Qin. That's why she makes so much of her, isn't it?'

Bao-yu burst out laughing.

'Everyone calls me a simpleton, but you're an even bigger simpleton than I am. That was only a joke. Qin's already betrothed to Academician Mei's son. Do you think I would have taken it so calmly if I *had* been betrothed to her? Don't you remember the scene we had last time, when I swore all those oaths and tried to break *this* beastly thing' - he pointed to his jade - 'and you had such a job trying to stop me? What are you trying to do? Start me off again?'

He ground his teeth.

'If only I could die this minute and my heart burst out of my body so that you could *see* how true it is! After that I shouldn't care if all of me - flesh, blood and bones - was burned to ashes, and the ashes turned to smoke, and the smoke blown by the winds into every corner of the earth !'

Big tears rolled down his cheeks. Nightingale covered his mouth up in alarm; then, as she wiped his eyes for him, she spoke to him soothingly as to a child:

'There, there. There's no need to get so worked up about it. *I'm* the one who needs to worry. That's why I said those things: to test you.'

'*You?*' said Bao-yu in surprise. 'What have *you* got to be worried about?'

'You know I never belonged to the Lin family, don't you,' said Nightingale. 'I was originally one of Her Old Ladyship's

servants, like Faithful and your Aroma. I was transferred to Miss Lin, but as it turned out I got on very well with her -ten times better, as a matter of fact, than the maid she brought with her from Yangchow - and since then we've become inseparable. Lately I've been worried by the thought that she might have to leave here - in which case, of course, I should want to go with her. But all my family is here. If I didn't go with her, it would seem like a betrayal after what we've been to each other all these years. On the other hand if I did go, it would mean leaving my family behind. I wasn't sure about how serious you were in wanting her to stay. That's why I made those things up. I wanted to test you. I never imagined you were going to make such an uproar, or I wouldn't have said them.'

'So that's what was worrying you!' said Bao-yu, smiling. 'Well, you are a simpleton. Please don't worry

about that any more. Let me try to put it for you in a nutshell. In life we shall live together; in death we shall mingle our dust. How will that do?'

Nightingale said nothing, but appeared to be thinking. One of the old women came in to announce that Jia Huan and Jia Lan had come to inquire after Bao-yu's health.

'Tell them it's very kind of them,' said Bao-yu, 'but not to come in here, because I've only just gone to sleep.'

'Very good,' said the old woman, and went off to relay the message.

'Now that you're better,' said Nightingale, 'you ought to let me go back to see how my other invalid is getting on.'

'Yes, you're right,' said Bao-yu. 'I was meaning to tell you last night that you could go back, but I forgot. I am completely better now. You can go back straight away.

Nightingale began tying up her bedding and getting her toilet things together.

'I notice you've got several mirrors in your vanity box,' said Bao-yu. 'Why don't you give me that little one with the pattern of caltrops on it as a keepsake? I can keep it by my pillow to use when I'm in bed, and it will be handy to take with me when I go out.'

Nightingale gave him the mirror, then, having first

arranged for someone to carry over her things, took leave of the other maids and returned on her own to the Naiad's House.

During the past few days Dai-yu's anxiety for Bao-yu had led to a relapse and had been the occasion of several fits of weeping. On inquiring nervously why Nightingale had returned, she was relieved to hear that it was because Bao-yu was better. As Amber's services were now no longer needed, she sent her back to Grandmother Jia.

That night, when all the others had gone to bed and she had undressed and was lying not far off from her mistress, Nightingale addressed her, in guarded undertone, on the subject of Bao-yu's intentions.

'Bao-yu really is a simple soul. Do you know what made him ill? It was because he heard that we were going away.'

Dai-yu said nothing. After waiting in vain for a reply, Nightingale went on as if speaking to herself.

'Much better stay where we are. You couldn't ask for a better family than this. And the two of you have grown up together and know each other's likes and dislikes. Where else would you find someone who understood you so well?'

Dai-yu snorted at her disgustedly.

'Aren't you tired after all your exertions during these last few days? I can't understand why, instead of chattering away to yourself, you don't take this opportunity to get a bit of rest.'

'It isn't lust chatter,' said Nightingale. 'I'm concerned about your future, Miss. It's been worrying me for years. You've no father or mother or brothers: there's no one else who *will* concern themselves about it. The important thing is to get it all properly settled while Her Old Ladyship is still well and in her right mind. You know what they say: "Good health in the old is like warm weather in winter: you can't depend on it." If anything were suddenly to happen to her, the chance of getting someone you really liked would have passed you by. No doubt they would do their best to marry you to someone of good family, but look how many of these young aristocrats keep concubines, and how changeable they are in their affections. Some of them if they were married to the Queen

of Heaven would tire of her in a week. And neglect is not the worst part of it; often there are hard words and harsh treatment to follow. When that happens, if the wife has a powerful family to stick up for her, it isn't so bad; but what about someone in your position? As long as Her Old Ladyship is alive you'll be all right, but once she's gone, you'll be at everyone's mercy. That's why I say we've got to make our minds up.

Easier a golden hoard to win

Than find one understanding heart.

You're a clever young lady. I'm sure you must know that saying.'

'This girl's gone out of her mind,' said Dai-yu. 'Just these few days away and she's come back completely altered. I shall have to tell Her Old Ladyship about this tomorrow and get her to take you back. I'm afraid you can't stay with *me* any longer.'

'I meant no harm,' said Nightingale. 'I've only told you to think about it; I haven't asked you to do anything wicked. Why *should* you tell Her Old Ladyship? It'll only get me into trouble, and what good will that do you?'

She said no more, and presently went to sleep.

Not so Dai-yu. However she might have concealed the fact from Nightingale, she was deeply affected by what the maid had said, and while Nightingale slept beside her, she lay awake weeping through the greater part of the night. The darkness was beginning to lighten when she finally dropped off to sleep. Washing that morning required an effort. Not long after she had finished her bird's nest syrup, Grandmother Jia came in person to see her and waxed eloquent on the importance of getting well.

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It was Aunt Xue's birthday and everyone from Grandmother Jia downwards sent her a present. Dai-yu looked out two little articles of her own embroidering to send her. Aunt Xue hired a troupe of child actors and threw a birthday party which everyone except Bao-yu and Dai-yu attended. Grand-

mother Jia took everyone to call on them both on her way hack from it.
Next day there was another party for the employees of the Xue family at which Xue Ke acted as host on his aunt's behalf. There were more festivities on the day which followed. Altogether three or four days were spent just in celebrating the one birthday.
Aunt Xue was very impressed with what she had seen of Xing Xiu-yan. She was such a refined, serious girl, in spite of her unfortunate upbringing: the very model of 'virtue in homespun and a wooden hairpin'. Aunt Xue had thought of her as a possible daughter-in-law, but when she reflected on the lawless nature of her son, it seemed a pity that so nice a girl should be thrown away on him. She was still trying to make her mind up about this when suddenly it occurred to her that Xue Ke was not yet betrothed and that he and Xiu-yan would make an ideal couple. She decided to ask Xi-feng for her advice. Xi-feng was enthusiastic.
'But you know how difficult Lady Xing can be,' she said. 'Why don't you leave it to me, Auntie? Let me deal with it in my own time.'
She found her opportunity of broaching the subject when Grandmother Jia next came to call on her.
'There's something my Aunt Xue wants you to do for her, Grannie, but she's a little bit shy of asking.'
'Oh? What's that?' said Grandmother Jia.
She laughed when Xi-feng explained.
'Good gracious, that's nothing to be shy about! It's a splendid idea. Let me have a talk with your mother-in-law about this. She won't refuse, I promise you.'
As soon as she was back in her own apartment, she summoned Lady Xing and proposed the match to her, urging its suitability in forceful terms.
Lady Xing did some rapid thinking: the Xue family were of respectable origins; they were immensely rich; Xue Ke was a good-looking boy; and Grandmother Jia was making herself responsible for the match. Confident that she would be able to turn it to her own advantage, she assented, to Grandmother Jia's intense satisfaction, without more ado. The

presence of Aunt Xue was now requested and the self-abasing civilities customary on these occasions exchanged between her and Lady Xing. When these had somewhat abated, Lady Xing sent someone to inform Xing Xiu-yan's parents, Xing De-quan and his wife, of the Xue family's proposal. Living as they now did on Lady Xing's charity, they were scarcely in a position to refuse even if they wanted to, and the messenger was soon back again reporting their prompt and enthusiastic acceptance.
'I love meddling in other people's affairs,' said Grandmother Jia jovially. 'I seem to have meddled successfully in this one. I hope I am going to be paid something for my services.'
'Of course,' said Aunt Xue. 'The only difficulty will be knowing how much to give you. What shall we say? Ten thousand taels? Probably you would regard that as too little! What we really need is a sponsor to settle these matters for us.'
'We may be short of manpower in this family,' said Grandmother Jia, 'but I dare say we could rustle up a couple of cripples for you!'
She sent someone to fetch You-shi and her daughter-in-law from Ning-guo House. As soon as they arrived, she explained why she had invited them, whereupon they turned to the other two ladies and offered them their congratulations.
'Now,' said Grandmother Jia when they had finished, 'you know our way of doing things in this family, don't you - you know we never haggle about bride-prices and "face" and that sort of thing? We want you to act as a third party and settle this for us. What we want is a settlement that is not too lavish and yet not too economical: something between the two. And when you've worked out what each of the parties should contribute, come and tell me what you have decided.'
You-shi promptly agreed to do this. Aunt Xue, delighted that everything had gone off so well, hurried home

and at once had a formal invitation to act as marriage-sponsor drawn up and sent over to Ning-guo House to confirm the arrangement.
You-shi knew Lady Xing too well to want to be mixed up

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in any affairs - particularly one of a pecuniary nature - to which she was a party. She had agreed in this instance only because Grandmother Jia had asked her to and she could not very well refuse. In the event she simply arranged matters in the way she thought would best please Lady Xing. Aunt Xue was a very accommodating person and could be relied on to fall in with almost any terms. But it is not with details such as these that our narrative is concerned.

Aunt Xue's betrothal of her nephew to Xing Xiu-yan was soon common knowledge throughout the household. At first Lady Xing wanted to segregate the girl by moving her in with herself, but Grandmother Jia objected.
'Surely she can stay where she is? She can't see anything of the *boy*, of course, but surely there's no harm in her continuing to see Mrs Xue and Bao-chai and little Qin? They're all females, after all. It will be *cosier* if they get to know each other better.'
Lady Xing did not renew her offer.
And what of the parties themselves? Xue Ke and Xing Xiu-yan had met briefly on the journey to the capital and there was no reason to suppose that they were not extremely pleased with the betrothal. Inevitably Xiu-yan became a little more withdrawn after it, spending rather less of her time in Bao-chai's and Bao-qin's company and speaking, when she was in it, rather more sparingly. But this was partly because Shi Xiang-yun was such a tease. Fortunately she was far too intelligent and well-bred to indulge in any of that false modesty, so common among girls in her position, which shows itself in affected simpering and ridiculous grimaces.
Ever since the day they first met, Bao-chai had felt sorry for Xiu-yan. First of all she was so poor. And then there was her father. Unlike most of the fathers that Bao-chai knew about - grave gentlemen who had gained wisdom with their years - Xiu-yan's father was a drunken sot who took little interest in his daughter's welfare. As for Lady Xing, Bao-chai could see that the affection she showed her niece was simulated and that really she did not care for her in the least. And Ying-chun, whose apartment she shared, was too docile to assert herself even on her own behalf, let alone anyone else's.

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Since Xiu-yan was too proud to ask for things, this meant that whenever anything was lacking, even one of the simple necessities of life, she had simply to go with out it. Knowing this, Bao-chai did all she could to anticipate her wants; but she gave by stealth, careful lest Lady Xing, who was sensitive to gossip, if to nothing else; should get to hear of it.

Xiu-yan had learned to cherish Bao-chai as a special friend long before this magnificent betrothal so wildly beyond her own and everyone else's expectations and, after it, continued from time to time to confide in her. Bao-chai for her part continued to treat her as an intimate friend and would use none of the formalities that are customary between prospective sisters-in-law.
One day, when Bao-chai was on her way to visit Dai-yu, she caught sight of Xiu-yan, who, as it happened, was also on her way there. Bao-chai smiled and beckoned and waited for Xiu-yan to catch up with her. The two girls then walked on together until they came to the rear side of a miniature mountain of rock. There, where no prying eyes could see them, Bao-chai stopped again.
'The weather is still really cold. Why have you changed Out of your winter clothes already and put on single linings?'
Xiu-yan hung her head and said nothing. Ba-chai guessed at once that she had been forced to pawn them.
'It must be because you haven't had this month's allowance yet,' she said. 'How could Cousin Feng be so thoughtless?'
'No,' said Xiu-yan. 'She didn't forget. She paid the allowance on time. But Aunt Xing sent someone to tell me that she thought I didn't really need two taels a month and that I ought to contribute one of them towards my parents' upkeep. She said that if there ever *was* anything I needed, I could always hent it from Cousin Ying's things' - suppressed emotion was causing her to lapse into her native dialect -'But I ask you, coz, how *could* I? Cousin Ying wouldn't mind - she is so meek - and she probably wouldn't notice, any road. But though *she* wouldn't say anything, you can be quite sure that the servants would. The nannies and maids in that apartment are such a prickly lot and so spiteful with their tongues. Although I am living there, I dare not ask them to do very

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much for me, and even for what little they do I am expected to find money to buy them drinks and other little treats with every four or five days. Even when I was getting two taels it wasn't enough, and now it's only one. The only way of raising money I could think of was by pawning my winter clothes. I got someone to slip out and do it for me the other day.'

Bao-chai sighed.

‘It’s a pity all the Mei family areaway just now. Academician Mei isn’t due back from his posting until the year after next. if they were here in town, Bao-qin could get married straight away and then we could go ahead with *your* affair and get you out of this mess. But as things are, your Prospective will never consent to get married before his sister, so the difficulty remains. I shall have to have a word with Mamma about this. Obviously you can’t go on as you are. Another year or two like this and I am afraid you will go into a decline.
‘In future, if those people are nasty to you, you must learn to put up with it. You mustn’t make yourself ill trying to please them. Perhaps you had better hand over the whole of your remaining tad to them when it comes: see if that will keep them quiet. But don’t go treating them any more, whatever you do. Never mind the spiteful things they say to you. If it gets too bad, you can always walk away. And if you are short of anything, don’t behave like a little frightened mouse; ask me straight out for it, without delay. I say this not because we are future sisters-in-law but because we are friends. We are friends, aren’t we, and have been ever since you came? If you are afraid of gossip, don’t come yourself when you want something, send your maid for it, then no one will know.’
Xiu-yan hung her head and the reply she made was scarcely audible. In order to change the subject, Bao-chai pointed to a **green** jade girdle-ring that was hanging from her waist.
‘Who gave you that?’
‘Cousin Tan,’ said Xiu-yan.
Bao-chai nodded.
‘She must have noticed that all the other girls were wearing one of these things and wanted to spare you the embarrassment of being the only one without. It is typical of her to be so thoughtful. However, I think you ought to realize that

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> these sort of gewgaws are really for the daughters of mandarins and noblemen. Look at me: you don’t see any jewellery on me. A few years ago, it’s true, I would have been smothered with it; but I know now that we are less well off than we used to be, and have given up wearing it as a means of economizing. No doubt when you marry you will be provided with a whole trunkful of this stuff, In the meantime, though, we don’t need to compete with the others in finery, you and I. As long as we are honest and remain true to ourselves, it doesn’t matter that we cannot equal them in appearance.’

Xiu-yan smiled.
‘In that case, I shall go back and take it off,’ she said.
‘Don’t be so precipitate,’ said Bao-chai. ‘She meant it as a kindness. If she sees you not wearing it, she will wonder why. I spoke only in general terms, for your future guidance.’
Xiu-yan murmured her assent.
‘Where are you going now, coz?’ she asked Bao-chai.
‘To the Naiad’s House,’ said Bao-chai. ‘Why don’t you go back now and get your maid to bring me that pawn ticket? I’ll send someone out on the quiet to redeem the things for you and get them round to you in the evening without anyone knowing, so that you can begin wearing them again as soon as possible. We don’t want you catching cold in this wind, do we? Oh, there’s just one other thing: where did you pawn them?’
‘I think it’s called the “Reliant”,’ said Xiu-yan. ‘It’s in Drum Tower Street West.’
Bao-chai laughed.
‘Well, at least they’ve stayed in the family. If the assistants realized where they had come from, they must have thought they were receiving an advance instalment of your trousseau!’
Xiu-yan coloured, realizing that the ‘Reliant’ must be one of the Xue family’s businesses. She did not say anything, however, but with a little laugh hurried back to look for the pawn ticket.
Bao-chai continued on her way to the Naiad’s House. She arrived to find her mother already ensconced and in the midst of conversation with Dai-yu.
‘Mamma, what a surprise! When did *you* arrive?’

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‘I’ve been so busy during these last few days that I haven’t had time to see her *or* Bao-yu. Today I decided to see both of them, but both of them seem to be better.’
Dai-yu urged Bao-chai to be seated.
‘The world’s affairs are very mysterious,’ she said, by way of bringing her into the conversation. ‘Who would ever have thought that your mother and Aunt Xing would end up as c*ommeres?*’
‘My child,’ said Aunt Xue, ‘you are too young to understand these things. Old folk talk about “the unseen thread that binds”. They say that marriages are decided by an Old Man Under the Moon who joins future couples together by tying them round the ankles with a **scarlet** thread, and that once he’s done that, it doesn’t matter how far apart they are, even if there are oceans between them, sooner or later something will happen to bring them together and they will end up husband and wife. These things are quite unpredictable. Sometimes there will be two young people whose parents on both sides are favourable to their union, who have lived years together in the same place, and who take it as a foregone conclusion that they are going to marry, yet if

the Old Man Under the Moon hasn't tied them with his **scarlet** thread, then in spite of everything, they never will. Take you two girls, now: we don't know whether at this moment the two young men you will marry are right here under our noses or somewhere "south of the mountains and north of the sea"!'
'Mamma!' said Bao-chai, burying her head in her mother's dress, 'how you do always drag one in when you get talking!'
'Look at her!' said Dai-yu, mockingly. 'What a great baby! She's ever so poised and grown-up when you aren't here, Auntie. It's only when she's with you that she puts on this little girl act.'
Aunt Xue stroked the recumbent head, still buried in her lap, and sighed indulgently.
'I suppose it's a bit like Cousin Feng and your grandmother. Chai can be perfectly serious with me when things need discussing, but at the same time she knows the little ways of cheering me up - she knows that when she becomes my little girl again, it helps me forget my troubles.'

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It was Dai-yu's turn to sigh now. A tear rolled down each cheek.
'I don't know why she has to do it here though unless she wants to rub in the fact that *I* haven't got a mother.'
'Oh Mamma, just listen to that!' said Bao-chai. 'Who's putting on a little girl act now?'
'You mustn't blame her for being upset,' said Aunt Xue. 'Poor child! She has no one.'
She stroked Dai-yu's hair and tried to comfort her.
'Don't cry, my dear. You mustn't be upset because I make a fuss of your cousin. I'm as fond of you, you know- perhaps even more so. Although Chai has no father, she *has* got me and Pan so you see I know that you have the greater need. *She* knows how fond I am of you, because I am always telling her. The only reason I don't show it more is because there are a lot of people in this household who are always ready to put a false construction on things. If they saw me being nice to you, they would say that I did it not for the very obvious reason that everything about you cries out to be loved and that one can hardly help loving you, but because I saw how much your grandmother loves you and wanted to curry favour with her.'
'You say you love me as much as Chai,' said Dai-yu. 'Let me be your god-daughter then. Don't refuse, Auntie, or I shall think you don't really mean it.,
'If you will have me for your godmother, I should like nothing better.'
'Out of the question,' said Bao-chai flatly.
'But why?' said Dai-yu.
Bao-chai smiled mischievously:
'Tell me, why do you think Cousin Xing was betrothed to my Cousin Ke? Why wasn't she betrothed to my brother, who is Cousin Ke's senior and who still hasn't got a betrothed?'
'I suppose because your brother is away,' said Dai-yu, 'or perhaps their horoscopes are incompatible.'
'No,' said Bao-chai, 'that's not the reason. It's because someone has already been chosen for my brother. We are only waiting for him to come home to make it public. I don't need

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to name names. If I tell you that you can't possibly become Mamma's god-daughter, you ought to be able to work it out for yourself.'
She winked at her mother and broke into a laugh.
This time it was Dai-yu who buried her face in Aunt Xue's bosom.
'Beat her, Auntie, beat her - I insist!'
Aunt Xue hugged her niece, laughing:
'You mustn't believe what she says. She's only teasing.'
'No, seriously, Mamma,' said Bao-chai, 'why *don't* you ask Lady Jia some time if you can have Cousin Lin for your daughter-in-law? You will never find a better one elsewhere.'
Dai-yu threw herself on Bao-chai and made as if to scratch her:
'Have you gone quite mad?'
Aunt Xue laughingly held them apart.
'If I thought that your brother was not good enough for Xiu-yan - which is why I betrothed her to your cousin Ke -I certainly wouldn't inflict him on this child here. Not so long ago Lady Jia was asking me about Bao-qin as a possible match for Bao-yu, but I had to tell her that Bao-qin was already betrothed - not that otherwise it wouldn't have been a very good match. The other day, when we'd finished discussing Ke and Xiu-yan's betrothal, she began teasing me about it. "Last time, when I wanted one of *her* girls," she said, "I couldn't have her; and now here she is snapping up one of *ours!"* She was only joking, of course, but I could see that she was thinking about Bao-yu still and half inviting me to make a suggestion. I rather wish now that I had. She is so concerned about him, and he *is* such a peculiar boy. You can't see him getting on with some girl chosen for him from outside. I think *much* the most satisfactory arrangement would be to betroth him to your Cousin Lin here.'
Dai-yu, who up to this moment had been listening open-mouthed, turned **scarlet** at the mention of her own name and with a cry of rage threw herself again on Bao-chai.
'I'll kill you! You deliberately led Auntie up to this.'

‘How ridiculous!’ said Bao-chai, laughing. ‘It’s Mamma who said it, not I. What are you hitting *me* for?’

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Already Nightingale had darted forward:
‘If that’s what you think, Mrs Xue, why don’t you talk to Her Old Ladyship about it?’
‘Goodness, child, you *are* impatient!’ said Aunt Xue, laughing, ‘I suppose if you are in such a hurry to get your mistress married, you must be thinking of a little husband for yourself!’
‘Mrs Xue!’ said Nightingale, crimson-faced. ‘You ought to know better at your age!’
She turned and fled.
Dai-yu who, when Nightingale intervened, had angrily bidden her to mind her own business, now gloated over her discomfiture:
‘Holy Name, it serves you right! You would poke your nose in, wouldn’t you, and now you’ve got smut on it!’
There was a burst of laughter in which the maids and serving-women joined. They were still laughing when Xiang- yun ran into the room, brandishing a piece of paper.
‘What sort of bill is this?’
Dai-yu examined the paper but could make nothing of it. The women below had recognized it, however, and tittered with amusement.
‘That’s a nice thing for a young lady to be carrying! they said. ‘If you want to know what that is, Miss, you’ll have to pay for the lesson!’
Bao-chai snatched the paper from Xiang-yun’s hand and looked. It was Xiu-yan’s pawn ticket. She hurriedly folded it away.
‘It looks like a pawn ticket that one of the women must have dropped,’ said Aunt Xue. ‘Whoever it is will be worried when she misses it. Where did you pick it up?’
‘What’s a pawn ticket?’ Xiang-yun asked her.
The women laughed:
‘What a simpleton! Fancy not knowing what a pawn ticket is!’
‘It’s hardly surprising,’ said Aunt Xue. ‘She’s had a very aristocratic upbringing, don’t forget, and in any case she is still very young. How *could* she know about pawn tickets? What occasion would she ever have of seeing one? In the

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household she comes from even if one of the servants had such a thing, they would take very good care that she didn’t see it. You shouldn’t call her a simpleton. I doubt very much whether any of your own young ladies would know a pawn ticket if she saw one.’
‘That’s true,’ said the women, smiling. ‘Miss Lin here didn’t know, so you can be quite sure the others wouldn’t. Even Bao-yu, although he goes outside quite a lot, has probably never seen one.’
Aunt Xue now explained what a pawn ticket was. Xiangyun and Dai-yu laughed incredulously.
‘The things people do for money! Is that what they do in *your* pawnshops, Aunt?’
‘That’s a funny question!’ said the women, laughing. ‘All crows are black, you know.’
‘Where did you find this?’ Aunt Xue asked again.
But before Xiang-yun could reply, Bao-chai interrupted:
‘It’s an old ticket, Mamma; it was cancelled years ago. Caltrop has been using it to fool them with.’
Aunt Xue believed her and did not pursue the matter.
Shortly after that a messenger arrived from the Ning-guo mansion to say that You-shi would ‘like a word when convenient with Mrs Xue’ and Aunt Xue got up and left them. As soon as she had gone, Bao-chai asked Xiang-yun where she had found the ticket.
‘I saw Xiu-yan’s maid Signet handing it, very furtively, to Oriole and Oriole slip it between the pages of a book. They thought I hadn’t noticed. I had a peep when they’d gone, but I couldn’t make out what it was, and as I knew you were both here, I thought I would come over and see if either of you could make anything of it.’
‘But why should Cousin Xing be pawning her clothes?’ said Dai-yu, puzzled. ‘And why, having pawned them, should she want you, Chai, to have the ticket?’
Bao-chai saw that Xiu-yan’s circumstances could no longer be concealed and explained to them both what had happened. Dai-yu, feeling ‘the fox’s sympathy for the hunted hare’, was much distressed, but Xiang-yun’s reaction was one of anger.
‘I’m going straight over to see Ying-chun about this,’ she

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said. ‘You’ll feel better, both of you, when I’ve given those beastly servants a piece of my mind.’
She would have gone, too, had not Bao-chai restrained her.
‘Are you out of your mind? Sit down and stay where you are.’

‘If you were a man,’ said Dai-yu, laughing, ‘you could go around like a knight-errant putting the world to rights; but a Jing Ke in skirts is just plain ridiculous!’

‘All right then,’ said Xiang-yun, ‘if you won’t let me talk to Cousin Ying about it, let’s simply have Xiu-yan over to live with us.’

‘We’ll talk about that tomorrow,’ said Bao-chai. A servant put her head round the door to make an announcement:

‘Miss Tan and Miss Xi have called.’

Hearing of their arrival, the three in the room fell silent.

For further details of the visit our reader is referred to the next chapter.

CHAPTER 58

In which the cock-bird who mourns his mate
Is found to be a hen
And a true heart is able to sympathize
with a strange kind of love

Our last chapter concluded with Tan-chun’s and Xi-chun’s arrival at the Naiad’s House, which put a sudden stop to the discussion of Xiu-yan’s affairs by the other three. Conversation was renewed after the new arrivals had inquired about Dai-yu’s health, but of a general, unserious nature, and shortly afterwards all four visitors took their leave and went their separate ways.

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The Dowager Consort of the late Emperor whose illness we referred to in an earlier chapter had now passed away and all noblewomen and wives of officials resident in the capital had to put on the mourning appropriate to their rank and present themselves at the Palace. A Special Edict was published prohibiting the holding of musical or dramatic entertainments by persons of rank for a period of one year and banning the celebration of marriages between commoners for a period of three months. Every day Grandmother Jia together with Lady Xing, Lady Wang, You-shi and Jia Rong’s wife Hu-shi had to go to the Palace to take part in the ceremonies of mourning, seldom returning until well after two o’clock in the afternoon.

These ceremonies, which took place in one of the side halls of the Palace, were due to last for twenty-one days, at the end of which time the body of the Consort was to be conveyed to the late Emperor’s mausoleum in Goodson prefecture, a distance of some ten days’ journey from the capital. On reaching there, the coffin was to lie in state for several more days while further ceremonies were performed preliminary to its final interment in the mausoleum. The whole expedition,

from start to finish, would take about a month. Cousin Then and You-shi were both supposed to take part in it, which would mean that throughout that period both the Ning-guo and Rong-guo mansions would be left masterless. A family council was held and it was decided, in order that one person at least should be left in charge of the two mansions, to petition for You-shi’s exemption on the grounds that she was *enceinte*.

At the same time Aunt Xue’s help was enlisted to keep an eye on the young people. For this purpose it was essential that she should move into the Garden; but it was something of a prQblem to know in which of its buildings she should stay. Bao-chai already had Xiang-yun and Caltrop living with her; Li Wan was having to accommodate Bao-qin, whom Grandmother Jia had placed temporarily in her care, and though Mrs Li and her girls were still at their uncle’s place in the city, they too were constantly dropping in on her and staying for three or four nights; Ying-chun was sharing with Xu-yan; Tan-chun was fully occupied with household business, and in any case the noisy bickering of Aunt Zhao and Jia Huan, who were constantly coming round to pester her, would have made her apartment a highly unsuitable place for Aunt Xue to live in; and Xi-chun’s place was too small. That left only the Naiad’s House for her to move into.

Aunt Xue did so the more readily because, in discussing these arrangements with her, Grandmother Jia had impressed upon her that Dai-yu was the young person most particularly in need of her care. And besides, Aunt Xue had always had a very great affection for Dai-yu. Now that they shared the same apartment she was able to give her undivided attention to Dai-yu’s welfare - to seeing that she had good food and enough of it, and that she took her medicines at the proper times. Never before had Dai-yu been so well looked after. She responded with a gratitude deeper than words, though it was by words that it was most often expressed: Aunt

Xue was now her kind ‘Mamma’, and when Bao-chai and Bao-qin were present, she addressed them and referred to them exactly as if they were her elder and younger sisters. Grandmother Jia, who had been worried at the prospect of being separated, even for a month, from her orphaned

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granddaughter, was both relieved and happy to observe this new development.

Aunt Xue, now that she was in the Garden, concerned herself only with the welfare of the cousins and disciplining of their maids; in other domestic matters, however important, she was unwilling to intervene. You-shi, too, although she visited the Rong-guo mansion daily, did little more than hear the roll-call and was most unwilling to exercise any real authority. As the only responsible person left in it she already had her hands full with the affairs of the other mansion and was kept extremely busy seeing that the temporary lodgings near the Palace which Grandmother Jia and the other ladies retired to in between ceremonies were kept regularly supplied with food and bedding and so forth.

While the senior members of the Ning-guo and Rong-guo mansions were so busy, the stewards and stewardesses of the two mansions were no less occupied, some of them in accompanying their mistresses each day to and from the Palace, some in attending to the provisioning and maintenance of the temporary lodgings, and some as an advanced party who staffed the lodgings in readiness for their mistresses’ arrival.

Lacking the discipline normally imposed by these officers, the domestics of both mansions who remained behind grew slovenly in their duties or took advantage of the exceptional circumstances to ally themselves with those placed temporarily in charge as a means of scoring off fellow-servants. Of the male staff at Rong-guo House only Lai Da and one or two others remained. Nearly all Lal Da’s most trusted lieutenants had gone. Owing to their inexperience he was finding the replacements he had made extremely unserviceable -and so stupid: their peculations were so transparently gross, their reports so patently unreliable, their recommendations so obviously biased; he would have had difficulty in enumerating all the defects he found in them or the troubles they caused him.

At this time all the great families which kept troupes of actors or actresses in their households were beginning to disband them. Hearing this, You-shi, after discussing the rnatter with other members of the family, approached Lady

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Wang with the suggestion that their own troupe of actresses should be disbanded. The method by which she proposed to do this was economical.

‘We have, of course, *bought* these girls,’ she said. ‘Although they can’t keep up their music, there’s no reason why we shouldn’t use them as maids. It’s only really the instructors that we need to get rid of.’

‘No,’ said Lady Wang firmly. ‘We cannot treat them like servants. These are daughters of free men, sold into their profession because their parents could not afford to keep them. They have given us a year or two of good entertainment. Now that this opportunity of releasing them has arisen, we ought to give them each a few taels and let them go. That was certainly what our ancestors would have done; and I do not believe that we have become quite so degenerate or so ungenerous that we cannot, in this matter at least, follow the ancestors’ example. It’s true that we have a few members of an earlier troupe still living with us; but there was a special reason for their staying. They didn’t *want* to go, so we gave them employment and found husbands among the staff for them when they were old enough to marry.’

‘Very well, we shall ask them,’ said You-shi. ‘If they want to go, we can send for their parents to come and fetch them and give the money to their parents. That will be safest. Otherwise we shall have all sorts of dubious characters turning up here to collect them and selling them when they get them outside, and our kindness in freeing them will be wasted. Of course, any of them who don’t want to go can stay with us.’

Lady Wang agreed and You-shi sent someone to Xi-feng to explain what had been decided. She also instructed the clerks in the counting-house to pay eight taels to each of the instructors and tell them that they were free to go where they liked. The costumes, theatrical properties and other movables in Pear Tree Court were carefully checked against the inventories and stored away and a caretaker was put in charge of the buildings.

As for the little actresses, on interviewing them individually, You-shi found that hardly any of them wanted to go. Some said that their parents were alive but did not care for them

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and would only sell them again if they went back to them; others that they had no parents and had been sold by uncles or brothers; others that they had no relations at all that they could go to; others that they had become attached to the Jia family and did not want to leave. In the end all but three of them elected to stay. After what she had said, Lady Wang could scarcely refuse to have them.

The three who were leaving were taken away by their foster-mothers to stay with them for the time being until their real parents could come to fetch them. Those who had chosen to stay were assigned to different apartments - mostly in the Garden - as servants. Elegante, the leader of the troupe$_1$ was reserved for Grandmother Jia; the

'leading lady', Parfumee, went to Bao-yu; Etarnine, the soubrette, to Bao-chai; the 'principal boy', Nenuphar, to Dai-yu; Althee, the leading 'painted face', to Xiang-yun; Cardamome, the second 'painted face', to Bao-qin; Artemisie, who specialized in old men's parts, to Tan-chun; and You-shi asked if she might keep Aubergine, who specialized in old women's parts, for herself.

The little actresses, though nominally in service, did nothing all day but wander about happily in the Garden, like uncaged birds rejoicing in their new freedom. Nobody made much effort to discourage them, as it was understood that they were wholly unaccustomed to waiting on other people and were none of them able to sew. It is true that one or two of them had the good sense to see that the future would be bleak for them without a craft, now that their theatrical training had been discontinued, and who applied themselves to learning domestic skills like sewing and spinning; but they were the exception.

An important day in the obsequies of the late Consort arrived when it was necessary for Grandmother Jia and the other ladies to start out for their temporary lodgings near the Palace at four o'clock in the morning. After recruiting themselves there with a small collation, they proceeded to the Palace to attend the ghostly breakfast of the Deceased. When that was over, they went back to their lodgings and had lunch. Then, after a brief rest, they returned to the Palace and

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remained there for both the None and Vesper offerings. Then back to their lodgings again for dinner before finally returning home.

The temporary lodgings were in the family temple of a high official in which perpetual devotions were maintained by a sisterhood of Buddhist nuns. The nuns occupied the two courtyards to east and west of the shrine-hall, but there were a great many spare rooms in these courtyards, all of them kept scrupulously clean by the nuns. The Rong-guo ladies had rented the rooms in the east courtyard and the Prince of Bei-jing's ladies those in the west one. As they had to leave for the Palace and return from it at the same times, the two lots of ladies had plenty of opportunities of meeting each other, and many courtesies were exchanged between them. But it is not with these outside matters that we are concerned.

Back, then, to the Garden. With Grandmother Jia and Lady Jia away for so much of the day and the prospect of their being away altogether during the month it would take them to travel to and from the mausoleum, there were a great many maids and womenservants with nothing much to do but wander about in it enjoying themselves. Their numbers were augmented by the women from Pear Tree Court, who were now attached to different apartments in the Garden. Suddenly there seemed to be dozens more people about in it than there ever had been before.

The girl-actresses were arrogant little creatures, imperious and tyrannical towards the servants, demanding and fastidious about their food and clothing, sharp and disputatious with their tongues - in a word, thoroughly difficult characters to deal with. The Pear Tree Court women all hated them, but had not hitherto dared to quarrel with them openly. To these women the closing of the drama school was a great relief. Some of them, in their gladness to be free of it, were willing to let bygones be bygones. Others, less magnanimous, still nursed their rancour but, the diaspora having separated them from their former charges, dared not carry warfare against them into another's territory.

It was the day of the Spring Cleaning festival and Jia Lian, having prepared the usual offerings, had gone with Jia Huan,

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Jia Cong and Jia Lan to the Temple of the Iron Threshold outside the city to clean the family graves. Jia Rong, accompanied by a party of clansmen from the Ning-guo side of the family, had set out separately for the same destination. Of the young male members of the family only Bao-yu, having not yet wholly recovered from his illness, was unable to go. After lunch Aroma noticed that he was showing a disposition to sleep.

'It's such a fine day,' she said, 'why don't you take a stroll in the Garden? If you lie down as soon as you've eaten, you won't digest your food.'

Bao-yu stepped somewhat reluctantly into a pair of slippers and, supporting himself with a walking-stick, shuffled off through the courtyard and out into the Garden.

Care of the Garden and its produce had lately been put into the hands of female experts and, this being the busy tune of year for gardeners, they were t6 be observed on every hand, trimming the bamboos, pruning trees and bushes, bedding plants Out, planting bulbs and sowing seeds. Other women were moving over the surface of the lake in punts, dredging up mud from the bottom and planting lotus-roots. On a miniature mountain of rock overlooking the lake an appreciative audience consisting of Xiang-yun, Caltrop, Bao-qin and some of the maids sat watching them. As Bao-yu slowly made his way up to them, Xiang-yun cried out in mock alarm:

'Quick, send the boats away! They've come to take Cousin Lin!'

Bao-yu blushed and laughed sheepishly.

'People can't help what they do when they're ill. You shouldn't make fun.'

'It's your fault for being so comical,' said Xiang-yun. 'Why do you always have to be so

different? Even your illnesses are different from everyone else's.'

Bao-yu sat down with them for a while and watched the women working.

'It's a bit win4y here,' said Xiang-yun presently, 'and the rock is rather cold to sit on. Don't you think you ought to go indoors?'

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Bao-yu had already decided that he would like to go and see Dai-yu, so, hauling himself up with his walking-stick, he took his leave of the girls and walked off, over Drenched Blossoms Bridge and along the embankment on the other side.

New growth hung from the weeping willows in strings of gold and the blossom-buds of the peach-trees had burst into a vermilion haze; but the big apricot-tree behind the rockery, its flowering past, was already in full leaf and covered with tiny apricots, each no bigger than a pea.

'What a shame!' he thought. 'Just those few days in bed and I missed the apricot blossom.

And in among the **green** leaves now
The young fruit hangs from every bough.

He stood and gazed at the tree. They were Du Mu's lines, written on his last visit to Hu-zhou, when he met the beautiful young dancer of a dozen years before and found that she was now a married woman with a brood of children. How did it go?

The spring-time blossoms, white and **red,**
Before the thieving wind have fled;
And in among the **green** leaves now
The young fruit hangs from every bough.

He thought of Xing Xiu-yan's betrothal. It would only be a year or two now before she married, and soon she too, like the girl that Du Mu wrote about, would be a mother with a brood of young children about her. People had to marry, of course: they had to reproduce their kind. But what a way for a lovely young girl to end!

The spring-time blossoms, white and **red** ...

Not so many years from now her jet-black tresses would turn to silver and her rosy cheeks become wrinkled and colourless. The thought of it made him feel sad and an involuntary sigh escaped from him. Then, as he continued to gaze at the tree, a little bird flew up, and perching on one of its branches, began to sing away for all it was worth. Bao-yu's day-dreaming took another turn.

'That bird must have come here when the tree was in

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blossom,' he told himself. 'What he's singing is a lament at finding the blossoms gone. You can tell it's a lament by the sound. Pity Gong-ye Chang, who understood the language of birds, isn't around! I could have asked him what it was saying. I wonder if it will remember to come here next year when the apricot-tree is in flower again?'

His reverie was interrupted by a sudden burst of flame beyond the rockery which caused the bird to fly off in alarm. Bao-yu was almost as startled as the bird. The brief crackle of flames was followed by an outburst of angry shouting.

'Nenuphar, you little wretch, how dare you burn paper offerings here in the Garden! I'm going straight off to report you. You're in for a whipping, my girl.'

Wondering what on earth could be happening, Bao-yu hurried round to the other side of the rockery to investigate. A tear-stained Nenuphar crouched on the ground, holding the chafing-dish with which the recent blaze had been kindled, and gazing with a sorrowful expression at the charred, still smouldering remains of a pile of gold paper 'spirit money'.

'Who's it for?' he asked her. 'You really shouldn't burn it here, you know. I suppose it must be for one of your parents -or is it for a brother, perhaps? Tell me the person's name and I'll get my boys to go out and buy a proper *baofu* for you and write the name on it.'

When she saw that it was Bao-yu, Nenuphar closed her lips tightly and no amount of questioning would elicit an answer from her. Just then the woman he had heard shouting came hurrying back, an evil expression of triumph on her face, and seized hold of the girl.

'Well, I've reported you to the young mistresses,' she said, 'and they're very, very angry.'

Nenuphar was still only a child. Terrified of the humiliation that awaited her, she now made a childish attempt to resist going.

'I said all along you were getting above yourselves,' said the woman. 'You can't do as you please in here like you could outside. It's different here. We like to have a bit of law and order.' She pointed to Bao-yu. 'Even Master Bao has to abide by the rules. I don't know what sort of a young madam you

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think you are to come along here and start breaking them. Come on! It's too late to start being afraid now. You'll have to come along and see them.'

'That's not spirit money,' said Bao-yu hurriedly. 'It's waste paper she's been burning for Miss Lin. You should have looked more carefully before you reported her.'

To Nenuphar in her desperation Bao-yu's appearance on the scene had been an added terror. She could hardly believe her ears when she heard him covering up for her. Her fear gave way to a surprised delight and she plucked up courage to defend herself.

'Yes, what makes you so sure it was spirit money? That was used writing-paper of Miss Lin's.'

But the woman was unimpressed. Stooping down, she picked out one or two of the unconsumed fragments from the ashes.

'Don't argue with me! Here's evidence! You'll have to come with me to the jobs room and explain yourself to them there.'

She took hold of Nenuphar by the sleeve and begun dragging her off; but Bao-yu held her by the other sleeve and struck at the woman's hand with his walking-stick until she let go.

'Take those bits of paper to them if you must,' he said. 'I suppose I shall have to tell you. Last night I dreamed that the Spirit of the Apricot-tree came to me and said that if I wanted to get better quickly, I must have an offering of spirit money made to her. She said it had to be made by a stranger, not by anyone from my own room, and no one else must know about it. And now, after I've been to the trouble of getting the stuff and finding this girl to make the offering for me, it's all wasted, because you saw her doing it. This is the first day I've been up since my illness. If I get ill again now, it will be your fault. Do you still want to take her? Nenuphar, go with her and see them. Tell them exactly what I have just said. And when my grandmother gets back I shall tell *her* what happened. I shall tell her that this woman interrupted you deliberately.'

Nenuphar was by now thoroughly cock-a-hoop. Now it was she who was tugging at the woman. The woman threw the bits of paper to the ground and addressed herself beseechingly to Bao-yu, a sickly smile on her face:

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I didn't know, really I didn't. If you tell Her Old Ladyship that, it will be all up with me.'

'Don't report back then, and I won't tell her.'

'But when I reported just now, they said I was to bring her,' said the woman. 'I'd better tell them she's been called away by Miss Lin.'

Bao-yu thought for a bit and then nodded. The woman went off to do as she had said. When she had gone, Bao-yu resumed his questioning.

'Who *was* it for then? I'm sure it wasn't for anyone in your family. Is it a secret?'

Nenuphar was grateful to Bao-yu for having protected her. Knowing now that he was a kindred spirit and to be trusted, she could hardly refuse him any longer. There were tears in her eyes when she answered:

'Besides myself there are only two other people in the world who know about this: Parfumee in your room and Etamine in Miss Bao's. After what happened today, I think I shall have to let you be a third; but you must promise never to speak about it to anyone else.'

She began to cry.

'It's no good,' she said. 'I can't say it to your face. After you've got back, when there's no one else around, you can get Parfumee to tell you.'

She slipped away then, leaving him full of curiosity.

Continuing his walk to the Naiad's House, he found Dai-yu looking thinner than ever but feeling, she assured him, very much better than she had been a few days earlier. She noticed how much thinner be had become, and the recollection of what had caused them both to look so haggard provoked the shedding of a few tears. They had not been speaking for more than a few minutes when, mindful that he was still convalescent, she urged him to go back and rest and he felt obliged to obey her.

When he got back, he was anxious to ask Parfumee about Nenuphar's secret, but Xiang-yun and Caltrop had just arrived and were engaged in lively conversation with her and Aroma in the adjoining room. Fearing that if he called her to him the others might ask questions, he resolved to be patient.

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After a while Parfumee went off with her foster-mother to have her hair washed. Her foster-mother had already let her own daughter wash her hair in the water. When Parfumee noticed this, she was loud in protest.

What, give me the water your daughter's washed in? Considering you take the whole of my monthly allowance, I think I deserve better than left-overs!'

Angry - the more so because she was in the wrong - the woman shouted back at her.

'Ungrateful little wretch! I'm not surprised they say players are hard folk to handle. However good a person may be to start with, once they get into that profession, they're ruined. You'd never think a scrubby little creature like this could have so many airs and graces. Nothing but the best for young madam! Sixes or aces, nothing else! And such a spiteful, sharp little tongue if she doesn't get what she wants! Worse than a biting mule!'

The two of them began to go at it then, hammer and tongs. Aroma Sent someone outside to quieten them: 'A little less shouting, you two! Just because Her Old Ladyship isn't here, nobody seems able to say anything without hollering at the tops of their voices!'

'It's that Paffumee making trouble,' said Skybright. 'I don't know what makes her think she's so wonderful. Just because she knows a few plays, you'd think she'd won the war or something!'

'It takes two to make an argument,' said Aroma. 'The older one shouldn't be so unjust and the younger one shouldn't be so unpleasant.'

'You can't blame Parfumee,' said Bao-yu. "'Any departure from the straight or even causes things to give voice." A famous philosopher wrote that. She's here without parents or anyone to look after her. This woman takes her money and then doesn't treat her properly. If that's not a departure from the straight and even, I don't know what is. You can hardly blame her for giving voice about it! How much does she get a month, anyway?' he asked Aroma. 'Wouldn't it save a lot of trouble if *you* took the money and looked after her yourself?'

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'I don't mind looking after her,' said Aroma, 'but if I do, it certainly won't be for the money. It wouldn't be worth making enemies over.'

She got up as she said this and, going into the other room, took a little bottle of Oil of Flowers, some hen's eggs, some soap and a hair-string and told one of the old women to convey them to Paffumee outside.

'Tell her to stop quarrelling. Tell her she can get some more water and wash her own hair with these.' Unfortunately the foster-mother chose to regard this as a public humiliation for her and grew even angrier.

'You wicked child,' she said to Parfumee', 'pretending that I keep back your money!'

She dealt her a couple of slaps, whereupon Parfumee burst out crying. Bao-yu was about to rush outside, but Aroma restrained him.

'What are you doing? I'll speak to her.'

But Skybright had already darted outside and was pointing at the woman angrily:

'You ought to know better, at your age! If we give her the things to wash her hair with that you wouldn't give her yourself, you ought to feel ashamed. I don't know how you can have the face to hit her. You wouldn't have dared hit her if she'd been in the school still, carrying on with her training.'

'I hit her for trying to show me up in public,' said the woman. 'I'm her foster-mother. I've a right to.'

'Musk,' said Aroma, 'I'm no good at arguing with people and Skybright is too excitable. *You'll* have to go and deal with her.'

Musk hurried over.

'All right, all right. There's no need to shout. Let me just ask you this one question. When have you ever seen anyone punishing their daughter in the master's or mistress's presence - I don't lust mean here, I mean anywhere in the whole Garden? Even in the case of a real daughter, not just a foster-daughter, once she's left home and gone into service it's for her master or mistress to punish her or the senior maids. We can't have *parents* chipping in all the time - otherwise how should we ever manage to train a girl? I don't know!

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You people, the older you get, the worse you seem td behave! It's not so long ago that we had Trinket's mother in here making a scene. I suppose she must be your model. But don't worry. During these last few days what with this one ill and that one ill and Her Old Ladyship busy all the time with other matters we haven't had a chance to report anything. But give us a few more days. We shall find an opportunity. We'll tell her everything. Then perhaps we shall see some of you highhanded people taken down a peg. And another thing. There's Bao-yu in there only just beginning to get better - even *we* daren't raise our voices above a whisper - yet here are you hitting a girl outside his room and making her cry like a howling wolf or a banshee.

The top people only have to be away from the house for a day or two and already you are behaving as if you were above the law. No one is safe from you. A few more days and you'll be hitting us, I shouldn't wonder! If you ask me, you're the sort of foster-mother the girl could do without. If you think the plant will only flourish with *your* tender care, you're very much mistaken!'

Bao-yu was so angry that he banged on the threshold with his stick.

'These old women have hearts of stone. It's bad enough that they can't look alter the girls, but to go maltreating them as well ...!

Almighty earth and heaven, what's to do?'

'What's to do?' said Skybright. 'Send the lot of them packing, useless baggages!'

The woman, shamed into silence by Musk's tirade, made no reply.

Musk looked at Parfumee, in her crabflower-red padded tunic and patterned **green** silk trousers unbound at the ankles, her glossy black hair hanging down her back, crying as if her heart would break. It was a spectacle so different from her more familiar stage appearances that Musk could not help laughing at its incongruousness:

'I must say, you don't look much like Cui Ying-ying at the moment. Reddie after her beating, though: now that's a part you could play without having to make up for it!'

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Skybright led Parfumee away and washed her hair for her. When she had towelled it dry, she did it up for her in a 'lazy knot' and told her to go back to Bao-yu's room when she had finished dressing.

Shortly after, a woman arrived from the kitchen to say that the food was ready, should they send it over yet? One of the junior maids went inside to ask Aroma.

'What does the clock say?' Aroma asked. 'With all that rumpus going on outside, I didn't hear it strike.'

'It didn't,' said Skybright. 'The wretched thing needs repairing again, I don't know why.'

She fetched a watch from somewhere and inspected it.

'It's about half a cup of tea off dinner-time,' she said. 'Tell them we'll be ready directly.'

The girl went off to relay this message.

'Come to think of it,' said Musk, smiling, 'that Parfumee *deserved* a slap or two for being so mischievous. She was the one who made the clock stop by playing about with the pendulum yesterday.'

She began getting things out and laying them in readiness for the meal. Presently junior maids carrying food-boxes came into the room and stood there while Skybright and Musk removed the covers and inspected the contents: a bowl of soup and the now familiar rice-gruel flanked by four different kinds of pickle.

'But he's better now,' said Skybright. 'How much longer has he got to go on eating gruel and vegetables in brine? Why can't they send him some proper food for a change?'

Musk had finished laying now. Taking the large bowl of soup (ham and bamboo-shoots) from the food-box, she put it on the table for Bao-yu to try. He bent down over the bowl and slurped up a mouthful.

'Ow, hot!'

Aroma laughed.

'Holy Buddha! You're not all *that* starved for meat, surely? I'm not surprised you burn yourself if you go at it so greedily.'

She picked up the bowl and gently blew on it, then, as Parfumee happened to be standing by, she handed it to her:

'Here, you can do it. You may as well make yourself

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useful, instead of mooning around all day doing nothing. But blow on it gently: we don't want you spitting in it.'

Parfumee began blowing as instructed. She seemed to be managing very nicely, but the foster-mother, who was standing outside the partition doorway whither she had insisted on coming 'to help' and who, in her ignorance of the Garden's etiquette, saw this as an opportunity of making up to the maids, came hurrying officiously into the room and tried to take the bowl from her.

'She's too inexperienced. She might drop it. Let *me* blow.'

Skybright shouted at her angrily:

'Get out of here at once! Whether she breaks the bowl or not is our affair: we don't need *you* blowing on it, at all events. Who said you could come inside the partition, anyway?'

Her anger transferred itself to the junior maids:

‘Young idiots! She probably doesn’t know about these things. You ought to have told her.’
‘We tried to keep her out,’ the maids protested. ‘We tried to tell her, but she wouldn’t believe us. *Now* do you believe us?’ they asked the woman. ‘Even the places we’re allowed into you’re only allowed into about half of’ but you seemed to think you could go bursting in even where *we* aren’t allowed to go - and you were shouting and waving your hands at us when we tried to stop you.’
They hustled her from the outer room, into which she had retreated, onto the verandah outside. The old women waiting in the courtyard below to take back the food-boxes and empty bowls laughed at her when she emerged.
‘You should ‘a taken a look at yourself in the mirror before you went inside, missus!’
The woman, angry and ashamed, had to bear their taunts in silence.
Parfumee was still blowing away at the soup. Bao-yu smiled at her:
‘Don’t destroy your lungs with all that blowing! Why don’t you try it now, to see if it’s all right?’
Parfumee thought he must be joking and smiled timidly at Aroma and the rest.

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‘Go ahead, taste it!’ said Aroma. ‘Why not?’
‘Watch me taste it,’ said Skybright, and took a sip from the bowl.
Encouraged by her example, Parfumee took a sip too.
‘It’s all right,’ she said, and handed Bao-yu the bowl.
Bao-yu drank about half the soup, ate a few pieces of bamboo-shoot, consumed half a bowlful of the gruel, and declared himself satisfied. The servants cleared away. A little maid came in with a wash-bowl. After he had washed his hands and rinsed his mouth out, it was Aroma’s and the other senior maids’ turn to have their dinner.
Bao-yu signalled to Parfumee with his eyes. A sharp-witted child - one, moreover, who had spent several years of young life in a school of drama - Parfumee responded like an old trouper. She had a stomach-ache, she told them. She didn’t feel like any dinner.
‘Oh well, if you’re not eating,’ said Aroma, ‘you may as well stay and keep him company. We’ll leave the gruel here. If you get hungry, you can eat some of that.’
She and the other maids then left.
Bao-yu was now able to tell Parfumee about his encounter with Nenuphar - how he had lied to protect her and how, feeling unable to answer his question herself, she had referred him to Parfumee for an explanation.
‘So who was she making the offering for?’
Parfumee’s eyes reddened slightly and she sighed.
‘Oh, Nenuphar is crazy.’
‘Why?’ said Bao-yu. ‘What do you mean?’
‘It was for Pivoine,’ said Parfumee, ‘the girl in our troupe who died.’
‘There’s nothing crazy about that,’ said Bao-yu, ‘if they were friends.’
‘Friends!’ said Partumee. ‘They were more than that. It was Nenuphar’s soppy ideas that started it all. You see, Nenuphar is our Principal Boy and Pivoine always played opposite her as Principal Girl. They became so accustomed to acting the part of lovers on the stage, that gradually it came to seem real to them and Nenuphar began carrying on as if they were really lovers. When Pivoine died, Nenuphar

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cried herself into fits, and even now she still thinks about her. That’s why she makes offerings to her on feast-days. When Etamine took over the roles that Pivoine used to play, Nenuphar became just the same towards her. We even teased her about it: “Have you forgotten your old love then, now that you’ve got yourself a new one?” But she said, “No, I haven’t forgotten. It’s like when a man loses his wife and remarries. He can still be faithful to the first wife, as long as he keeps her memory **green.**” Did you ever hear anything so soppy in your life?’
‘Soppy’ or whatever it was, there was a strain in Bao-yu’s own nature which responded to it with a powerful mixture of emotions: pleasure, sorrow, and an unbounded admiration for the little actress. He took Parfumee’s hands in his own and told her with great earnestness what she must say to Nenuphar.
‘Tell her never, never to use that paper stuff again. “Spirit money” is a superstitious invention of modern times: you’ll find nothing about it in the teachings of Confucius. All she needs to do when feast-days come round is to light a little incense in a burner. Provided that it’s done with reverence, that’s all that’s needed for conveying one’s feelings to the dead. It’s the sincerity with which we make the offering, not the offering itself that counts. You see that burner on the table over there? Whenever I want to remember someone dear to me - it doesn’t necessarily have to be on a feast-day or any particular day, by the way - I light some incense in it and put out a cup of fresh tea or water, or sometimes some flowers or fruit if I have any. You can even use “unclean foods”- as long as they’re devoutly offered: that’s the important thing. Tell her not to go burning that paper stuff any more.’
Parfumee promised. After that she finished off the gruel. Then someone came in to say that Grandmother Jia

had got back.
Of that you shall hear more in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 59

By Willow Walk the conservers of property
resort to violence and abuse
*And at **Green** Delights the defenders of law and order*
invoke a higher authority

Hearing that his grandmother and the other ladies were back, Bao-yu put on an extra garment and shuffled off, walking-stick in hand, to greet them. He found them tired out by the taxing routine of the past few days and anxious to retire to bed as soon as possible. Nothing of interest happened during that night. The ladies were up again at four o'clock next morning and off once more to the Palace.

The date of their departure for the mausoleum was fast approaching. Faithful, Amber, Parrot and Pearl busied themselves getting together the things that Grandmother Jia would need on the journey, while Silver, Suncloud and Sunset did the same for Lady Wang. When all was ready, they went over everything, item by item, with the most senior of the servants who were accompanying their mistresses. There were altogether sixteen of these: six maids and ten older women. The male servants, who are not included in that number, were meanwhile preparing the mule-litters that their mistresses would ride in and getting the harness and other gear into good order. Faithful and Silver were not among the sixteen. They were to stay behind and look after their mistresses' apartments while they were away.

Some days before the funeral cortege was due to set out, the maids packed up the covers and hangings of their mistresses' travelling-beds. These were collected by a party of four or five women, who, with the aid of some menservants, took them by cart through the back streets to the lodgings where their mistresses were to spend the night before their departure and put them up ready for them to sleep

The Jia ladies and their retinue left the mansion the day before the cortege was due to start. Grandmother Jia and Jia Rong's wife shared the first litter; Lady Wang followed on her own in the second; Cousin Zhen and the menservants provided them with a mounted escort. Then followed several large covered carts in which the maids and womenservants were travelling. The carts also carried a large number of bundles containing changes of clothing for the ladies. The other members of the family, led by Aunt Xue and You-shi, accompanied the little procession as far as the outer threshold of the main gate to see the old lady off.

While the column was reforming itself in the street, Jia Lian appeared on horseback at the head of a small party of mounted grooms. He shepherded his parent's litters into place between those of Grandmother Jia and Lady Wang, then, fearful of the possible consequences of leaving the baggage train with its female freight unguarded, trotted back to a position behind the carts and, with his mounted followers, brought up the rear.

Inside the mansion Lai Da greatly increased the numbers of the watch and ordered the entrances to the two main courtyards to be kept permanently closed. Anyone wanting to go in or out of the mansion now had to do so through the small side gate on the west corner. The ornamental gate dividing the outer from the inner part of the mansion was closed at sundown. So, too, were the main and side gates of the Garden. The gate which the cousins normally used for getting into or out of the rear part of Lady Wang's quarters and the gate on the east side which gave access to the corner gate of Aunt Xue's courtyard were left open. Since they affected only the intercommunication of the already sealed-off inner parts of the mansion, it did not seem necessary to close them. Faithful and Silver shut up the living-rooms normally occupied by their mistresses and went to sleep with the other maids in the servants' quarters at the back. Each day at sundown Lin Zhi-xiao's wife conducted a party of ten or so senior women into the Garden to police it during the night. The number of pages employed in the gallery outside for the purpose of sounding the night-watches was increased. Everything was

done, in short, to ensure that the security of the mansion was maintained.

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Waking one fine, fresh morning from vernal slumbers, Bao- chai, on raising the bed-curtain and stepping

down into the room, became sensible of a very slight chilliness in the air, the reason for which was apparent when she opened the door and looked out. A little shower, falling in the last watch before dawn, had refreshed the earth and turned the mosses everywhere a more brilliant shade of **green.** She went in again and called to the others to get up.

While they were washing, Xiang-yun complained of an irritation in her cheeks which she feared might herald an outbreak of the mild eczema she sometimes suffered from and asked Bao-chai for some rose-root orris to put on them.

'I gave the last of it to Qin a few days ago,' said Bao-chai. 'Frowner has a lot. I had been meaning to ask her for some, but as I haven't had any trouble with my own cheeks this year, I forgot about it.'

She ordered Oriole to go and get some. As Oriole was about to leave, Etamine said that she would like to go with her because she wanted to talk to Nenuphar. The two girls set off from All-spice Court, chattering and laughing as they went.

At Willow Walk they followed the line of the embankment. The trailing golden strings of the weeping willows were already flecked with emerald.

'Do you know how to weave things with these?' Oriole smilingly asked her companion.

'What sort of things?' said Etamine.

'Oh, things to look at, things to use - all sorts. Just wait while I break off a few and I'll weave a little basket out of them. I'll leave the leaves on, then, if we fill it with different kinds of flowers, it will look ever so pretty.'

Temporarily forgetting about the orris-powder, she reached up and broke off some of the tender willow-twigs. She got Etamine to hold them for her; then, as they walked along together, she plaited them into a little basket. From time to

time she stopped to pick a flower or two that grew beside the way. The finished basket was a pretty little open-work one with a handle, bursting all over with the **green**ery which she had been careful not to pull off. When it was filled up and stuck all over with flowers, it looked really charming. Etamine was enraptured:

'Oh, Oriole, *do* let me have it!'

'We'll give this one to Miss Lin,' said Oriole. 'We can pick some more twigs on the way back and I'll make baskets like this for you all.'

By this time the two girls had arrived at the Naiad's House. Dai-yu had not yet completed her toilet. She was very much taken with Oriole's handiwork.

'Ah, a living basket! Who made it?'

'I did,' said Oriole. 'It's for you, miss.'

'Oh, but it's charming!' said Dai-yu, taking it. 'No wonder they're always saying how clever you are with your hands.'

After admiring it a little longer, she told Nightingale to hang it up where she could see it

Oriole first inquired politely after Aunt Xue and then asked Dai-yu about the rose-orris. Dai-yu told Nightingale to wrap some up for her.

'I'm better now,' she told Oriole as she handed her the packet. 'I feel like going out today for some exercise. Tell Chai that there's no need for her to pay her call on Mamma today or to visit me. As soon as I've done my hair, Mamma and I will be coming over to *her* place. We can have our lunch there. We shall be quite a little family party!'

Oriole promised to relay the message and went into Nightingale's room to collect Etamine; but Etamine and Nenuphar had just reached the most interesting part of their conversation and were most unwilling to be separated. Oriole proposed a solution to Nightingale.

'Your mistress is going over to our place presently. Why not let Nenuphar come with us now and wait for her there?'

'By all means,' said Nightingale. 'She gets up to so much mischief, we shall be glad to have her off our hands for a bit!'

She got out Dai-yu's spoon and chopsticks, wrapped them

up in a napkin of West Ocean linen, and held them out for Nenuphar.

'Here you are: you can take these for her. May as well make yourself useful.'

Nenuphar took the things from her and set off, smiling happily, with the other two. They made their way to Willow Walk again and Oriole broke off a lot more twigs and, sitting down on a nearby rock, began straightway plaiting them to make into another basket. She told Etamine to go ahead with the rose-orris and come back for her presently when she had delivered it; but both girls were fascinated by Oriole's skilful weaving and could not tear themselves away. Oriole threatened to suspend work on the basket if Etamine did not do as she was told.

'Come on,' said Nenuphar. 'I'll go with you. We can hurry back in no time.'

After they had gone, while Oriole sat plaiting on her own, Mamma He's daughter Swallow walked up and smilingly asked her what she was making. Oriole was still talking to her when the other two got back. Swallow looked at Nenuphar curiously.

'Tell me, what *was* that paper you were burning the other day when my Aunt Xia caught you? She was going to report you, but Bao-yu made out that it was she who was in the wrong, so she couldn't go through with it. She was ever so angry. She came and told my mother all about it. What on earth did you do during all that time you were living outside together to make such an enemy of her?'

Nenuphar sniffed.

'I didn't do anything. It's because she's so greedy. She can't squeeze as much out of me as she used to be able to. To mention nothing else, look at all the food she and the others used to take home with them when they were working with us outside. You know they did.'

Swallow laughed.

'She's my own aunt. I can't very well criticize her in front of other people. I must admit, though, it does seem to be as Bao-yu once said. "A girl before she marries is like a priceless pearl, but once she marries the pearl loses its lustre and

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develops all sorts of disagreeable flaws, and by the time she's an old woman, she's no longer like a pearl at all, more like a boiled fish's eye." He said, "How can the same person, at different times in her life, seem like three completely different people?" - Of course, I knew at the time he was only talking his usual nonsense; but really there does seem to be some truth in it. I don't know about other people's families, but it's certainly true of my mother and my aunt. The older they get, the more they seem to care about nothing else but money. When we were all living together at home, they used to complain that there weren't any job for us that would bring in a bit of income. Then this Garden was built and I was lucky enough to be among those who were chosen to work in it -doubly lucky, in fact, because I was assigned to **Green** Delights. That meant that quite apart from the fact that they didn't have to find my keep any more, they were getting an additional four or five hundred cash each month that I managed to save out of my wages. You'd have thought they'd have been satisfied with that, but oh no! Then *they* got jobs themselves, looking after these player-girls in Pear Tree Court. My Aunt Xia had Nenuphar for foster-daughter and my mother had Parfumee. So for this last year or two they've been really comfortably off. Now that you've all moved inside, of course, it's rather out of their hands; but they won't give up. It really makes you laugh. First my aunt having that row with Nenuphar, and then my mother having that row with Parfumtee. That was over the shampoo. Parfumee had asked my mother I don't know how many times to shampoo her hair for her. Then Parfumee's monthly allowance came in and my mother had no excuse for putting her off any longer, so she bought the shampoo, but when she'd bought it, she told me to wash *my* hair with it first. Well, I didn't like to do that. I mean, I've got money of my own, and even if I hadn't, I could always get the stuff for washing my hair with from Aroma or Skybright or Musk without any trouble by simply asking for it. So I said no, I wouldn't. So then she got hold of my younger sister and washed *her* hair first. Needless to say, when she called Parfumee after that there was a quarrel. Oh, and then she wanted to go and blow on Bao-yu's soup. Oh dear,

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I could have died! I told her about the rule as soon as I saw her going in, but she wouldn't believe me. Oh no, Mother knows best! So of course she made a fool of herself. It's a good job there are so many of us working in the Garden and no one can ever remember who is related to who, otherwise they might get the impression that the people in my family do nothing but quarrel all the time.'

'Incidentally, this place where you've chosen to do your basket-making is on the territory of another of my aunts - my father's sister. Ever since she was put in charge of it, she's treated it as if it were her own property. She slaves away on it from morning to night. What's more, she makes me come and watch over it for her: she's so terrified of any of it getting spoiled. It's got so that I can hardly do my own job properly. And now that Mother's moved into the Garden, she keeps an eye on it too. The pair of them watch over it like hawks. No one else is allowed to touch a blade of grass here. I don't mind telling you, if they come along this way and find you've been picking their flowers and breaking their young willow-twigs, they won't be at all pleased!'

'In anyone else's case, perhaps not,' said Oriole; 'but *my* case is different. When the Garden was divided up, it. was agreed that dally supplies of stuff from it were to be sent to all the apartments. That included, apart from things to eat, flowers for everyone's hair and flowers to put in the vases. Now my mistress, it so happens, was the only one who said she

didn't want a daily supply of flowers. She said she would let them know whenever she wanted any, but up to now she never has. So you see, in my case they are hardly likely to object even if they do find out that I've been picking some.'

These words were scarcely out of her mouth when who should appear, hobbling along on her stick, but this same aunt that Swallow had been talking about. Oriole and Swallow invited her to come and sit down on the rock. The old woman felt a pang of displeasure as her eye travelled from the little heap of broken willow-twigs to the freshly-picked flowers that Nenuphar and Etamine were holding, but since it was Oriole who appeared to be responsible, she forbore to complain

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of the vandalism and found something to grumble at her own niece about instead.

'When I tell you to come here and keep an eye on things, you prefer to stay at home and play. Then when the others ask you to do something for them, you pretend that you can't because you're already working for me. You use me like a magic charm, so that you can do a disappearing act whenever there's a job of work to be done!'

'First you tell me to come here, then you're afraid the others will want me so you tell me off for being here,' Swallow protested. 'I can't be in two places at once, aunt!'

'Don't you believe her, missus!' said Oriole teasingly. '*Sbe's* the one who picked all these things and pestered me to weave them for her. I tried to get rid of her, but she wouldn't leave me alone.'

'For goodness sake I' said Swallow agitatedly. 'Don't make jokes like that. She'll take you seriously.'

Alas, it was all too true! This aunt of Swallow's was a 8tupid old woman whose senile infatuation with money was such that beside it all human ties had long since ceased to count. At Oriole's words the pent-up anguish with which she viewed this hateful spoliation of her domain found relief in action: she raised her stick and, with the presumptuous tyranny of old age, struck Swallow several times with it across the back.

'Little baggage!' she said. 'How dare you answer me back! Your own mother hates you so much she's itching to get her teeth in you. Don't you go raising your voice at *me!'*

'Oriole was only joking,' said Swallow, weeping - partly from the pain and partly from the humiliation of being beaten in front of the others. 'Why *should* my mother hate me? I haven't burnt the washing-up water! What am I supposed to have done?'

Dismayed that her words should have had such an effect, Oriole stepped hurriedly between them and seized the aunt's upraised arm.

'I was only joking, missus. Is it to shame me that you are beating her?'

'I'll thank you not to meddle in what doesn't concern you,

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miss,' said the old woman. 'Do you think I should not be allowed to discipline my own niece just because *you* are here?'

The crassness of this reply caused Oriole to flush with anger.

'You can discipline her any time you like, but I don't see why you should choose to do it when I make a joke,' she said scornfully. 'All right, go ahead and discipline her, then.'

And releasing the old woman's arm, she sat down on the rock again and got on with her weaving.

The next thing that happened was that Swallow's mother appeared on the scene, looking for her daughter.

'What are you doing there?' she shouted as she caught sight of her. 'I thought I told you to go and fetch some water.'

'Come over and see what she's been doing,' the old aunt shouted back at her. 'I've no hold over her any more than you now, it seems. She's being very impertinent to me.'

'Oh, what's she been doing this time, sister-in-law?' said the woman, coming up to them. 'She's got no use for her own mother any more, I knew that; but I thought she might have a bit of respect left for *you* still.'

Recognizing the newcomer as Swallow's mother, Oriole wanted to explain; but the aunt did not give her a chance.

'Look at that!' she said, pointing to the willow-twigs on the rock. 'A great girl like her - you'd think she'd know better! And not content with that, leading other people on to ruin me as well!'

Swallow's mother was still smarting from her unsuccessful quarrel with Parfumee and

was angry with Swallow for not having taken her side.

'Little strumpet!' she shouted, bearing down on her wrathfully and slapping her across the head. 'How long now have you been working with those young madams? - it hasn't taken you very long to pick up their airs and graces! But don't you go thinking I can't lay my hands on you any more. A foster-daughter's one thing, but you are my own flesh and blood. I can still look after *you* when I feel like it. Little painted whores, telling me I can't go inside where you can go! I wish you'd go inside and stay there: perhaps if you stayed inside long enough, you might find a customer!'

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She grabbed hold of the little half-made willow basket and waved it in Swallow's face.

'And what's this supposed to be? What's the bloody meaning of this?'

'*I* made that,' said Oriole. 'Don't curse the mulberry tree when you mean the locust. *If* it's me you're angry with, why not say so and leave her out of it?'

Swallow's mother was intensely jealous of these senior maids like Oriole and Aroma and Skybright, for she knew that their status and authority were greatly superior to her own. She feared them and deferred to them, but doing so cost her a good deal of angry resentment which she vented on the junior maids. On this occasion her anger was further exacerbated by the presence of her sister's enemy, Nenuphar.

Swallow was now making her way tearfully towards **Green** Delights. Her mother was afraid that if they asked her there why she was crying and she told them, there would be further insults to put up with from Skybright, so she hurried after her to try and stop her.

'You come back I' she shouted. 'You'll go when I say you can.'

But Swallow refused to stop, and her mother, greatly incensed, rushed forward, intending to lay hands on her. Swallow happened to turn and see her coming, however, and got away by running even faster. Her mother, continuing the pursuit, slipped on the moss and fell over, to the great delight of Oriole and the other two.

Oriole was by now so disgusted with the whole affair that she threw everything - basket, twigs and flowers - into the water and went off home, leaving the old aunt blessing herself in pious horror at the waste.

'Wicked creature!' she called out after her. 'You ought to be struck by lightning, throwing away good flowers like that!'

She set about picking some herself then, to deliver to the various apartments.

As for Swallow, she went on running until she came to **Green** Delights. There, just inside the courtyard, she ran full tilt into Aroma, who was just at that moment setting

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out to pay a **c**all on Dai-yu. Swallow clung to her imploringly.

'Save me, miss! My mother's going to beat me again.'

At the sight of the mother, arriving now in hot pursuit, Aroma could no longer contain her annoyance.

'That's twice in three days: first your foster-daughter and now your own daughter. Is it to show off the size of your family that you do this, or do you really not know any better?'

Being a relative newcomer to the Garden, Swallow's mother had as yet formed no very clear impression of Aroma beyond that she spoke very little and was probably a fairly harmless sort of person.

'I should mind your own business, if I was you, miss,' she said rudely. 'You know nothing about these matters. It's because you're all so soft with the girl that she's got so out of hand.'

She darted after Swallow again, her hand upraised to strike her. Aroma was so angry that she turned round and began marching back to the house. On her way she passed Musk, who was hanging some handkerchiefs out to dry under the crab-apple tree. Musk looked over her shoulder to see what all the shouting was about.

'I should leave them to it, if I were you,' she advised Aroma. 'Just let them get on with it and see what happens.'

She signalled to Swallow with her eyes as she said this. Swallow' understood her immediately and dashed inside the house to take refuge with Bao-yu. The other servants smiled at each other in pleasurable anticipation.

'Now there'll be trouble,' they said. 'Now we shall really see something!'

'Why don't you calm down a bit?' Musk said to the woman. 'Surely you're not going to set yourself up against the whole apartment?'

The woman saw her daughter go up to Bao-yu inside the house and Bao-yu take her by the hand.

'Don't worry,' Bao-yu said to the girl. 'I'll look after you.' Swallow, still crying, told him the whole story of Oriole and the willow-wigs. Bao-yu was deeply shocked, but, for form's sake, pretended to blame Swallow for what had happened.

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'It's bad enough having rows in here; what do you want to go upsetting your aunt outside for?'

'What this good woman said just now is right,' Musk said to the other servants. Perhaps we *are* too slack. Perhaps we *don't* know enough about these matters to deal with them properly ourselves. What we need is someone whose opinion she will listen to, someone who really knows what's what.'

She turned to a little maid standing near by.
'Go and fetch Patience. If Patience can't come, fetch Mrs Lin.'
As the little maid ran off on her errand, the other women in the compound drew round Swallow's mother with interested smiles.
'Better ask them to call that child back,' they advised her. 'You don't want Miss Patience coming here.'
'If she's "Miss Patience", she'll just have to be patient and listen to reason,' said the woman defiantly. 'I never yet heard of a mother being disciplined for trying to discipline her own daughter.'
The others smiled at her ignorance.
'You don't know who Miss Patience is, though. Miss Patience is Mrs Lian's Number One. If she's in a good mood, you might get away with a telling-off; but if she's not my goodness, you're in for a packet of trouble!'
Just then the little maid came back with a message.
'Miss Patience was busy, but she asked me why I'd come and when I told her she said, "Tell her she's dismissed and get Mrs Lin on the corner gate to give her forty strokes of the bamboo."'
It was now the mother's turn for tears and entreaties.
'It wasn't easy for me to get this job,' she said. 'I shan't get another like it. And I'm a widow, too: I've no one else at home. From your point of view that's an advantage, because I can give all my attention to serving you. But it means that it's my only livelihood: if you turn me out, I don't know how I'm going to keep alive.'
Aroma began to relent.
'But if you want to stay here,' she said, 'you really must learn to behave yourself and do what you are told. You

really can't go around hitting people all the time. What are we to *do* with a person like you? This daily shouting and quarrelling is giving our place a bad name.'
'Take no notice of her,' said Skybright. 'Send her packing. Who's got time to stand around arguing with people like her?'
Swallow's mother appealed to the other maids:
'I admit I was in the wrong; but if you tell me what to do, I'm willing to learn. Give me another chance, young ladies, you won't regret it. It's a "work of merit", don't forget, to help another person mend their ways.'
She appealed to Swallow:
'It was on account of beating you that I got into this tr6uble. And I didn't beat you very hard. Put in a word for me, there's a good child!'
Bao-yu himself now felt sorry for the woman and told her that she could stay.
'But no more trouble, mind! Any more trouble from you, and you'll be out like a shot - *and* you'll be given the beating!'
The woman thanked first Bao-yu and then all the others in turn. She had already left when Patience looked in to see what the trouble was.
'Forget about it!' said Aroma. 'It's all over.'
'Well, they say "where mercy is possible, mercy should be shown",' Patience observed. 'If you can see your way to letting her off, it certainly saves us some trouble. I can't understand it, though. It's only a few days since Their Ladyships left, yet already the whole place seems to be in a state of mutiny. Before I've finished dealing with trouble in one place, it crops up in another. I scarcely know which way to turn.'
'I thought we were the only ones,' said Aroma. 'I didn't realize there were others.'
'Oh, this is *nothing!'* said Patience. 'There have been seven or eight outbreaks just during these last three or four days. Compared with the others, this trouble of yours is a very minor affair. We've had something much more upsetting - and more ridiculous - than this to contend with.'
Aroma was curious to know what it was. But as to whether Patience told her or not, that will be revealed in the chapter which follows.

CHAPTER 60

As a substitute for rose-orris
Jia Huan is given jasmine face-powder
And in return for rose essence
Cook Liu is given lycoperdon snow

Aroma, you will recall, had asked Patience what in particular it was that had been giving her so much trouble. Patience smiled mysteriously:

Something no one would ever guess. You'll have a good laugh when I tell you. I won't tell you for a few days yet, though, because I still haven't quite got to the bottom of it -and I haven't got time now, in any case.'
As if to prove that this was so, one of Li Wan's little maids arrived at that very moment:
'Miss Patience? Oh, there you are! Mrs Zhu's waiting for you. Why don't you come?'
'I'm coming, I'm coming,' said Patience, breaking away from the others with a laugh and hurrying after her.
Aroma and the others laughed, too.
'She's grown as popular as hot cakes since her mistress's illness: everyone wants her at once!'
Patience's business with Li Wan is no part of our story. We remain with Bao-yu and the test at **Green** Delights.
'Swallow,' said Bao-yu, 'you and your mother had better go to Miss Bao's place and make it up with Oriole. You can't let her go on feeling offended.'
'Yes,' said Swallow, and hurried out to find her mother. Bao-yu shouted to them through the window as the two of them were crossing the courtyard:
'Don't say anything about it in front of Miss Bao. You don't want Oriole to get a telling-off.'
Mother and daughter shouted back a reply and continued on their way, conversing as they went. Swallow began reproaching her mother when they were out of earshot:

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'I *told* you, Mother, again and again, but you wouldn't believe me. All this trouble you've got yourself into - it was so unnecessary.'

'Get along with you, little hussy!' said her mother, laughing. 'You know what the proverb says: "Never suffer, never learn". I've learned my lesson. I don't need any lectures from you!'

'If only you could be content with the job you've got, Ma, and not be always pushing forward so,' said Swallow gently. 'There are all sorts of benefits to be had from working here, after you've been here some length of time. I'll tell you just one of them. Bao-yu says that when the time comes, he's going to ask Her Ladyship to give us maids - *all* of us, that is, not just the ones who work in his room - our freedom, so that you can marry us to whoever you like. What about that for a start?'

'Really?' Her mother's delight was tempered with incredulity.

'Why should I tell a lie?'

The pious invocations which this news evoked continued until they were almost at All-spice Court. They arrived there when Bao-chai, Dai-yu, Aunt Xue and the others were having lunch. Swallow and her mother waited until Oriole came out to make the tea, then, as she emerged, Swallow's mother stepped forward to make her apology.
'I'm afraid I was a bit hasty just now, miss. I said sonic things I shouldn't have done. I hope you won't hold it against me. Anyway, I'm very sorry.'
Oriole, all smiles, begged them both to be seated and would have given them tea; but mother and daughter said they had business to attend to and took their leave. They were already on their way back to **Green** Delights when Etamine came hurrying after them.
'Just a minute, just a minute!'
She was holding a little packet which she wanted them to deliver to Parfumee for her. It was rose-orris, she explained, for the face.
'That's a bit unnecessary, isn't it?' said Swallow. 'They must have plenty of it there they'd be only too willing to give

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her if she wanted any. Why go to the trouble of sending her some?'
'What they do with theirs is their concern,' said Etamine. 'This is mine and I want to give it to her as a present. Please take it with you.'
Swallow could scarcely refuse.
When she and her mother got back to **Green** Delights, Jia Huan and Jia Cong were with Bao-yu inside, having arrived on a formal visit a few moments previously to inquire about his health. Swallow turned to her mother.
'Now, Mother: I'll go in alone. There's no need for you to come in with me.'
Her mother received this without a murmur. All her former wilfulness was quite forgotten and she stood docilely outside while Swallow entered.
Bao-yu, seeing her come in, realized that it was Only to report the successful conclusion of her mission and nodded to her curtly to show that he had understood. There was therefore no need for her to say anything, and after standing silently for a few moments inside the doorway, she slipped out again, signalling with her eyes to Parfumee as she did so to follow her into the Outer room. There she handed the packet to her and told her in an undertone what Etamine had asked her to say.
Bao-yu, having nothing whatever to talk to his visitors about, had been idly following this transaction out of the corner of his eye, and when Parfumee came in again, he asked her what it was that she was holding. Parfumee told him and handed him the packet. He praised Etamine's thoughtfulness while opening it up to have a look.

Jia Huan craned forward and smelt the powder's cool, delicious scent. Stooping down, he fished a sheet of paper from inside his boot.
'Give us a bit, brother!' he said, holding the paper out for Bao-yu to pour some in.
Bao-yu would have given him some, but Parfumee was unwilling that Etamine's gift to her should be shared.
'No, don't take any of that,' she said. 'I'll get some more for you from outside.'

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Bao-yu, divining the reason for her reluctance, quickly did the packet up again.
'Here you are. Hurry up and get some more then.'

Parfumee took the packet, and having stored it safely away in the room where she kept her things, looked in the drawer of her vanity-case for her own supply, only to find that the box she had kept it in was empty - why she could not imagine, because she was sure there had been some left in it that morning: But when she asked the others, of course, no one knew anything about it.
'There's no time to bother about that now,' said Musk. 'Obviously it must have been someone from this room. They must have found themselves short and "borrowed" yours. Give him something else. It doesn't matter what: he'll never know the difference. Anything to get rid of them, so that we can get on with our lunch!'

Following this advice, Parfumee made up a little packet of jasmine-scented face-powder and took it inside to the boys. Jia Huan, grinning broadly, stretched out his hand to receive it, but she threw it contemptuously on the kang and he had to stoop down to pick it up. When he had stowed it inside the breast of his jacket, he and Jia Cong finally took their leave.

With Jia Zheng permanently away and Lady Wang and the other ladles now also absent, Jia Huan had lately taken to staying away from school for several days at a time on the pretext that he was ill; he therefore felt no compunction in entering his mother's courtyard during the daytime. He did so now, very pleased with himself, to look for Sunset, whom he found chatting with Aunt Zhao.

'Look, I've brought you something nice,' he said, going up to her, all smiles, and holding out the packet: 'something for your face. You know you're always saying how good roseorris is for skin troubles - how much better than the silver powder you get from outside - well, have a look at this!'

Sunset opened the packet, took one look at its contents, and let out a hoot of laughter.

'Who did you get this from?'

Jia Huan told her.

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'They've been having you on,' said Sunset. 'This stuff isn't rose-orris, it's jasmine face-powder.'

Jia Huan looked again. It did in fact have a slightly **pink**ish tinge, and when he sniffed it, he found that it had a sweet, almost sickly perfume, quite unlike the clean, fresh scent of the orris.

'Well, anyway, it's good stuff,' he said. 'Orris or this stuff; it's all powder, isn't it? You can keep it to use on your face. This is still better than anything you could buy from outside.'

Sunset put it away resignedly.

Aunt Zhao eyed her offspring scornfully.

'You don't think if they'd got anything really good they'd give it to *you,* do you? I'm not surprised she made a fool of you; I'm surprised you bothered to ask her for it. Take it back and throw it in her face, that's what you ought to do. Now that the others are all either chasing around the countryside after this funeral or lying with their toes curled up in bed is just the moment for a good old row. Stir them all up a bit. Pay them back for some of the things they've done to us in the past. No one's going to be bothered to dig a little thing like this up in two months' time when they're all back again. And even if they do, you've got a good excuse. Bao-yu's your elder brother; you can't do anything to offend him, I agree. But that doesn't mean that you have to put up with what every little cat or dog of his chooses to do to you.'

Jia Huan hung his head.

'It's not worth a quarrel,' said Sunset, defending him. 'Much better just grin and bear it, whatever we think.'

'Just stay out of this, will you?' said Aunt Zhao. 'It's got nothing to do with you. He knows he's in the right. It's a golden opportunity to go and tell these little hussies exactly what he thinks of them.' She pointed at Jia Huan scornfully. 'Pah! Spineless creature I If ever *I* say a word out of place or give you the wrong thing by mistake, *I* get black looks from you soon enough! Oh yes, you can be very fierce with your own mother! But when some little chit of a girl makes a fool of you, you take it lying down. How can you expect the servants to respect you when you grow up if you always behave like this? Oh, you're so useless, you make me

sick!’

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Shamed and angered by her words, yet still not daring to act upon them) Jia Huan made a dismissive gesture with his hand.

> ‘It’s all very well to talk, but *you* wouldn’t dare to go there any more than I would. You want me to go back there and have a row with them, don’t you? All right, suppose I do and they tell the school. I’m the one who’ll feel the pain when I get beaten, not you. You’re always stirring me up to do things; then, when I get beaten and sworn at, you just keep your head down and say nothing. This time you’re trying to stir me up to have a row with these girls. Well, if you’re not afraid of Tan-chun, why don’t you do it yourself? Then perhaps in future I might take a bit more notice of what you said.’

His words touched Aunt Zhao on the raw.

‘What?’ she screamed. ‘Me afraid Of my own flesh and blood, of my own daughter that I once carried inside me? That’s a good story!’

She snatched up the packet of orris-powder from where Sunset had placed it and went rushing off in the direction of the Garden. Sunset, having found expostulation in vain, slipped off to another apartment to shelter from the storm. Jia Huan slunk off through the ornamental gate to play on his own outside.

As Aunt Zhao, still in a highly combustible state, went charging into the Garden, who should she run into but old Mamma Xia, that aunt of Swallow’s who was also the foster-mother and implacable enemy of Nenuphar. From Aunt Zhao’s livid face and bloodshot eyes it was evident to the old nannie that she was in a very nasty temper. Mamma Xia politely inquired where she was going.

‘Now even the little painted actresses who haven’t been with us more than a few days are discriminating against us. I could take it from anyone else, but to have little creatures like that putting you in your place - it’s more than flesh and blood can bear!’

As these sentiments, insofar as she could make sense of them, seemed very much in accord with her own, Mamma Xia asked her, with some interest, precisely what it was that had

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upset her. Aunt Zhao explained how Jia Huan had asked for rose-orris and been fobbed off with ordinary face-powder.

‘My dear Mrs Zhao,’ said Mamma Xia, ‘have you only now begun to realize what they are like? Why, what you have just told me is nothing I The other day they were even burning ghost money in here - and Bao-yu sticking up for them, if you please I If anyone else brings anything into the Garden, it’s all “unclean, unclean I” - there’s no end of a fuss. But ghost money, than which there’s nothing more unclean that *I* know of, that’s all right, apparently. You’re the most senior person after Her Ladyship, Mrs Zhao. I think you ought to put your foot down for once. I’m sure if you did, everyone would respect you for it. If you ask me, players is only trash anyway, so even if you upset them, there’s nothing much they can do about it. Let these two things, the powder and the ghost money, be your justification for making an example of them. I’ll support you with my evidence. Give them a taste of your authority now and you will find it that much easier to deal with other things later on. Even if the young mistresses don’t like it, they’re not going to side against you with riff-raff like these.’

Aunt Zhao’s resolve was strengthened by this encouragement.

‘I didn’t know about the ghost money,’ she said. ‘Tell me what happened.’

Mamma Xia did so, in great detail, concluding with a further incitement to action.

‘Go and have it out with them, Mrs Zhao I We’ll stand by you If there’s any trouble.’

These words were as music in Aunt Zhao’s ears. Emboldened by them, she marched off without more delay to **Green** Delights.

It chanced that Bao-yu was out when she arrived (he had heard that Dai-yu was visiting All-spice Court and gone off to join her there) and Parfumee was having lunch with Aroma and the other maids. The girls all rose to their feet as Aunt Zhao entered and politely invited her to join them.

‘Won’t you have some lunch, Mrs Zhao? Why are you in such a hurry?’

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Ignoring the invitation, Aunt Zhao stepped forward, threw the powder she was carrying in Parfumee's face and, with stabbing index finger for emphasis, began shouting at her abusively.

'Little strumpet! You're a bit of bought goods, that's all you are. We paid down money and bought you, so that you could be trained to sing for our entertainment. Play-actors and prostitutes are the class of people you belong to; the lowest servant in this household is still a few steps above you. So what makes you think you have the right to go discriminating between one person and another? It's no skin off your nose if Bao-yu wants to give something of his away to somebody: what business have you to try and stop him? I suppose you thought when you palmed that stuff off on Huan that he wouldn't know the difference. Well, let me tell you: Master Huan is Bao-yu's brother, whatever you may think of him, and that means he's one of the masters, and there's no cause for you to look down on him.'

Parfumee, never one to take things quietly, Set up a howl of tearful protest.

'I gave that stuff to him because I hadn't got any orris and I was afraid if I told him I hadn't got any he wouldn't believe me. Anyway, it's good powder. And suppose I *have* been trained as an actress, I've never played outside for money. I'm a little girl, not a trumpet or whatever it was you called me. And as for being "bought goods", well, it wasn't *you* who bought me. And anyway, look who's talking! I thought all of us here were bought goods. I don't know why you of all people would want to drag that up.'

'Stop that at once!' said Aroma, shocked, and tried to pull her Out of the way. But Aunt Zhao, in speechless fury, had already advanced on Parfumee and dealt her a couple of resounding slaps on the head. Aroma expostulated.

'She's only a child, Mrs Zhao, you don't want to put yourself on the same level. Leave it to us to deal with her.'

Parfumee was not to he struck with impunity and reacted to the assault with a fine display of histrionics, weeping, shouting and throwing herself about in all directions.

'How dare you hit me, you horrible old woman! You should

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look at yourself in the mirror! Go on, hit me again then, hit me again! I don't want to go on living!'

Lowering her head, she drove it into Aunt Zhao's midriff, continuing, as she butted into leer, to repeat her challenge. Several of the servants shouted at her and attempted to pull her off. Aroma would have done so too, but Sky-bright drew her to one side and advised her against joining them.

'Leave them to it, Aroma Y6u and I don't want to get mixed up in this. It's the law of the jungle now: you hit me, I hit you. Heaven knows where it will end!'

The servants who had followed in Aunt Zhao's wake, when they heard the rumpus inside, gave thanks to the Lord Buddha that justice was at last being done. Among them, the old women who bore grudges against the little actresses were particularly gratified to hear that Parfumee was being beaten.

The news travelled quickly. Nenuphar and Etamine, who had found a quiet corner of All-spice Court in which to be alone together, heard it when the two former 'painted faces' of their troupe, Xiang-yun's Althee and Bao-qin's Cardamome, burst in on them to enlist their support.

'Come on, you two! If we let them bully Parfumee, we shall all of us suffer. It's time to come out in the open and make a stand. Let's show them a bit of spirit!'

The four of them were only children, full of righteous indignation for their friend. Without a moment's reflection they rushed off in a body and went charging into **Green** Delights. Cardamome made first impact, and Aunt Zhao would have been swept off her feet had she not been simultaneously ringed round by the three others, who, with fists flailing, heads butting, and all emitting loud 'boo-hoos', pressed in upon her rear and sides. Skybright and the senior maids, though pretending concern and making half-hearted attempts to intervene, found it difficult not to laugh; but Aroma was genuinely distressed and dashed from one to another of them, dragging them away from Aunt Zhao. It was useless. As she pulled one off, another would dart in to replace her.

'What's the matter with you all?' wailed Aroma. 'If you've got a grievance, why can't you discuss it like sensible human

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beings? You can't go taking the law into your own hands like this. I never heard of such a thing!'

Aunt Zhao could only curse helplessly. Etamine and Nenuphar held her firmly by each arm and Althee and Cardamome had her pinned between them with their heads.

'Kill us!' they kept shouting, 'Kill us all four!'

Parfumee meanwhile lay stretched out corpselike on the ground, having cried herself into a swoon.

The little actresses might have remained locked in their grapple with Aunt Zhao indefinitely, but Skybright had already sent Swallow to bear word of what was happening to Tan-chun, and You-shi, Li Wan and Tan-chun, together with Patience and a number of female domestics, now arrived upon the scene and shouted to them peremptorily to release her.

Aunt Thao was by now pop-eyed with anger and the veins stood out thickly on her forehead. They asked her how she came to be in such a predicament, but her reply, though long and voluble, was made almost incomprehensible by rage, and You-shi and Li Wan, unable to make anything of it, contented themselves with shouting some more at the actresses. Tan-chun, though, merely sighed.

'This isn't really very serious. You are too easily angered, Aunt. As a matter of fact there was something I wanted to discuss with you, but the maids didn't seem to know where you had got to. Now it appears that you were in here, working yourself into a rage. Do come with us now.'

You-shi and Li Wan smilingly confirmed the invitation.

'Yes, Mrs Zhao. Come with us to the office and we can discuss things with you there.'

Since she could scarcely object to being consulted, Aunt Zhao was constrained to go along with them, but even as she went she continued muttering angrily to herself until Tan-chun cut her short:

'These girls are here for our amusement,' Tan-chun said. 'They are like pets. You can talk to them and play with them if you feel like it, or if you don't, you can simply ignore them. It's the same when they are naughty. Just as, when your puppy-dog bites you or your kitten scratches you, you can either ignore it or have it punished, so with these

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girls. If they do something to offend you, you can either let it pass, or, if you don't feel able to, you can call in one of the stewardesses and have them punished. There is absolutely no need to go rushing off in person, shouting and hollering at them. It's so undignified. And besides, it sets so bad an example. Look at Aunt Zhou. *She* doesn't seem to suffer any of this disrespect you complain of and *she* isn't always rushing off after people to have it out with them. If I were you, Aunt, I should go back to your room now and try to calm down a bit. And don't go listening any more to those trouble-makers. There's no reason why you should do other people's work for them; you get no thanks for it; they merely laugh at you for being stupid. However angry you may feel now, try to be patient for a few days until Lady Wang gets back and we'll see what we can do to get all this sorted out then.'

This dressing-down was effective, insofar as it left Aunt Zhao without a word to say, and she returned in silence to her room. As soon as she had gone, Tan-chun burst out angrily to the others.

'You'd think she'd know better at her age. Why can't she do *anything* to make people respect her? I mean, what a ridiculous thing to quarrel about! And what a way to behave! She will listen to absolutely anything anyone tells her. She has absolutely no judgement of her own. And those wretched old women take advantage of the fact to use her as their cat's-paw.'

The more Tan-chun thought about it, the angrier she became. She ended up by ordering the women to make some inquiries and find out whose incitement it was that had goaded Aunt Zhao into action. The women went off obediently to investigate, but turned to each other with shrugs and smiles as they left the building.

'Like looking for a needle on the ocean bed!'

And though they had Aunt Zhao's women and all the women from the Garden up in front of them for questioning, not one of them would admit to knowing anything at all about it, and they were obliged to report back to Tan-chun that they had failed.

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'But we shall go on making inquiries, miss,' they said. 'If we find anything suspicious, we shall report it to you.'

Tan-chun's anger had by this time subsided and she would have let the matter drop; but Artemisie, the little actress who had been assigned to her apartment, came to

her privately to tell her that she could identify the culprit.
'It was Mamma Xia,' she said. 'She hates us and she is always trying to get us into trouble. The other day she tried to get Nenuphar into trouble for burning spirit-money, but Bao-yu had *asked* her to burn it, and when he owned up, Mamma Xia hadn't a leg to stand on. Today, when I was delivering those handkerchiefs for you, I noticed her and Mrs Zhao twittering away for ever such a long time together and when they saw me coming they moved out of the way to avoid me.'
It seemed highly probable that it *was* Mamma Xia who had done the inciting; but these little actresses were all closely in league together, Tan-chun reflected, and all of them were exceptionally mischievous: it would be too risky to act on the evidence of what one of them had said. She thanked Artemisie for her information, but inwardly decided to do nothing.
By an unlucky chance Mamma Xia had a granddaughter who worked in Tan-chun's apartment and did various little errands for the maids, with all of whom she was popular. Her name was Cicada, but the maids all called her 'Ciggy'. On this particular occasion Tan-chun had gone back to the jobs room' after lunch, leaving Ebony in charge of her apartment. Ebony now asked Ciggy to go to the Garden gatehouse and get one of the pages there to run out and buy her a sweet-cake. Ciggy objected that she had just finished sweeping the courtyard and had a backache. She told Ebony to ask someone else.
'There's no one else I *can* ask,' said Ebony. 'I tell you what. If you'll do this errand for me now, I'll give you a piece of good advice that you can pass on to your grandma when you get there.'
And she proceeded to tell her about Artemisie's denunciation.

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'Tell her to be on her guard.'

'The little beast!' said Ciggy, taking the money for the sweetcake. 'She wants to join in too, does she? Wait till I tell my gran!'
And off she went to the back gate of the Garden.
It was a slack time now in the kitchen and the women, Mamma Xia among them, having for the time being finished with fetching and carrying; were sitting outside on the steps and gossiping. Ciggy asked one of them to go out and buy a hot fried sweetcake for her and then proceeded to give her grandmother an account, interlarded with much bad language of her own, of what Ebony had told her about Artemisie.
Mamma Xia, both angered and alarmed by what she heard, was all for going off straight away, having it out with the little actress, and protesting her innocence to Tan-chun; but Ciggy prevented her.
'Don't go, Gran! What can you say to them if you do go? How are you going to explain how you got to know about it? Once they start asking questions, you'll be in the soup again. I've told you this to put you on your guard. You don't have to do anything about it.'
Just then Parfumee peered in the gateway of the kitchen courtyard and called across to Mrs Liu, the cook, who was still banging about inside the kitchen.
'Cookie, Master Bao says, for his vegetable dish this evening could he have something cold and vinegary again, please, only not so oily as last time?'
'Very good,' Cook Liu stood in her doorway and called back cheerfully. 'Why should they send you about such a great, important matter? Come in and look around, if it's not too dirty for you.'
Parfumee had barely stepped into the courtyard when the woman to whom Ciggy had entrusted the money arrived back carrying Ebony's hot fritter on a saucer.
'Oo, lovely hot fritter! Give us a taste!' said Parfumee jokingly.

'That has been ordered and paid for by someone else,' said Ciggy primly, as she took the saucer from the woman. 'It is not for you.'

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'Do you fancy one, miss?' Cook Liu asked Parfumee. 'I've got one in here that I bought for our Fivey you can have if you like. It hasn't been touched yet, so it's quite clean.'

She brought the fried cake out on a saucer and handed it to Parfumee.
'There you are. Now you wait there a moment and I'll heat up a nice cup of tea for you to go with it.'
She went inside again to rake the top off the fire and heat some tea up in a skillet. But instead of waiting for her, Parfumee picked the fritter up from its saucer, went over to Ciggy with it, and held it under her nose for her to inspect.
'Look What's that, then? Fritter. Who wants *your* mouldy fritter? I was only joking. I wouldn't eat yours if you went down on your bended knees and begged me to!'
She began to crumble it up between her fingers and throw the pieces to the birds.
'Don't worry, Mrs Liu!' she called out in the direction of the kitchen. 'I'll buy two catties of these for you

presently.'
Ciggy glared at her in outrage.
'Old Thunder up there must be blind not to strike you dead,' she said bitterly. 'Either that, or he must be angry with me for something. Still, I can't compete with you, can I! I haven't got anyone to rush out and give *me* things, or trot around after *me* like a self-adopted slave, or chip in with a good word for *me* when there's an argument.'

'All right, young ladies, that's enough!' said the women on the steps. 'Can't you even see each other without having words?'
The more discerning of them, sensing that a storm was brewing and not wanting to get involved, had already begun slipping off elsewhere. But Ciggy had no stomach for a fight and went off, muttering angrily to herself, without further argument.

When the women had all gone, Cook Liu came bustling Out of her kitchen for a private word with Parfumee.

'That business we were talking about the other day -have you spoken to him about it yet?'

'Yes, I have,' said Parfumee. 'I was going to remind him of it today, but that wretched Zhao woman came along and

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upset everything with her quarrelling. How's Fivey? Did she drink any of that Essence of Roses I brought her the other day?'

'She drank it all,' said Cook Liu. 'She loved it. She'd really like some more, to tell the truth, but she doesn't like to ask.'
'That's all right,' said Parfumee. 'I can easily get her some more. I only have to ask for it.'
The object of Parfumee's inquiry, who owed her strange name to the fact that she was the fifth of Old Liu's granddaughters, though only the daughter of a cook, was in both looks and intelligence a match for any of the senior maids -Patience, Aroma, Faithful or Nightingale - and it was only because of a weakly constitution that she was still, in her sixteenth year, without employment. Recently, however, observing how numerous the maids were in Bao-yu's apartment and how light their duties were, and hearing that it was his intention to give them their freedom when they had finished service with him, her mother had conceived the ambition of getting her on the staff of **Green** Delights. Lack of a contact there had at first made this ambition seem unrealizable; but Cook Liu had previously worked at Pear Tree Court, where her cheerful and ungrudging service had won her golden opinions with the girls. They greatly preferred her to their own foster-mothers. And so when Parfumee moved into **Green** Delights, the cook had easily. prevailed on her to tackle Bao-yu on her daughter's behalf. Bao-yu had consented willingly, but the situation created by Xi-feng's illness together with other more recent developments had so far prevented him from seeking higher approval for the appointment.

But we digress.

Bao-yu heard about the fracas created in his apartment by Aunt Zhao while he was at All-spice Court visiting the girls. Though deeply distressed on Parfumee's behalf, he decided, after some hesitation, that intervention by him could only make matters worse, and resolved to stay where he was. He did so until word reached All-spice Court that Tan-chun had succeeded in getting Aunt Zhao out of the way. Re-

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turning then, he had formally reproved Parfumee for her belligerency and then sent her on an errand to the kitchen.

Parfumee now arrived back at **Green** Delights and reported on the fulfilment of her mission. She also told him that, if he still had any, Fivey would like some more of the Essence of Roses.

'Yes, I think I've still got some,' said Bao-yu. 'Look, why don't you give her all of it? I don't drink it very often myself.'
He sent Aroma to fetch it. As there was not a great deal of it left, he told Parfumee that Fivey might as well keep the bottle. Parfumee went back to the kitchen again to give the bottle to Cook Liu.

When she got there, she found Fivey there as well. To give her ailing, cooped-up daughter a little treat, Cook Liu had brought her along with her that day when she went to work. The girl had just been taking a little walk in the environs of her mother's kitchen and was now resting her feet in the kitchen and having a cup of tea. Mother and daughter, when they saw the glittering five-inch crystal bottle half-full of ruby liquid that Parfumee was carrying, assumed that it was some of Bao-yu's West Ocean grape wine that she was bringing them.

‘Sit yourself down,’ said Cook Liu. ‘I’ll just fetch the mulling-pan and boil up some water to heat it in.’
Parfumee laughed.
‘That’s all there is, I’m afraid. He says you can keep the bottle.’
Fivey realized that the **red** liquid must be not grape wine but some more Essence of Roses, and thanked her effusively for her kindness. Parfumee asked her how she felt.
‘A bit livelier today,’ said Fivey. ‘That’s why I came in with Mother. I’ve been for a walk all around here, but there’s really not much to look at just a lot of rocks and the backs of buildings. I haven’t seen anything that you could really call a *view.’*
‘Why don’t you go right inside?’ said Parfumee.
‘Because I won’t let her,’ her mother chipped in. ‘None of the young ladies in there knows her. If some inquisitive person

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were to stop her and start asking questions, she’d have a lot of trouble explaining what she was doing. Once you’ve got her a place in there, as you so kindly promised, I’m sure there will be plenty willing to show her around. She’ll be able to look around the Garden then until she’s sick of the sight of it!’
‘You don’t want to worry,’ said Parfumee. ‘I’d look after her.’
‘I’m sure you would, bless you!’ said the cook. ‘But folks like us have to be more careful.’
She poured Parfumee a cup of tea. Parfumee accepted her hospitality to the extent of using some of this as a mouth-wash before getting up to go.
‘My hands are a bit full at the moment,’ said Cook Liu. ‘Fivey will see you out.’
The two girls went out together. Having first ascertained that there was no one else about, Fivey impulsively took Parfumee by the hand:
‘Did you *really* ask him about that?’
‘Of C*ourse* I did!’ said Parfumee. ‘I wouldn’t deceive you. I’ve found out that there are two vacancies that haven’t yet been filled: one of them is the place left by Crimson, for whom Mrs Lian still hasn’t found him a substitute; the other one is Trinket’s. If he asks for you, it will be only one out of those two places, so he will be perfectly within his rights. The only reason he hasn’t done so already is because Patience keeps telling Aroma that if we have any requests concerning either jobs or allowances to make, we’d be well advised to put them off for the time being. The fact is that Miss Tan is looking for someone to make an example of. She’s already made an example of Mrs Lian by turning down two or three of her requests in a row, and now she’s trying to pick on us. She hasn’t found an excuse for doing so yet, but she hasn’t given up trying. So if we go asking her about a thing like this now, it’s almost a foregone conclusion that she will say no; and once she’s turned it down, it will be very difficult to get that refusal reversed. Much better wait until the situation here has quietened down a bit - till Their Lady-ships are back again and everyone is in a good mood. If he

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approaches the old girl then, she’ll give him anything he asks for, no matter what it is.’
‘I know,’ said Fivey, ‘but I’m too impatient to wait that long. I want that job *now.* In the first place it will make my mother happy. She’ll feel that all the trouble she has had in bringing me up has not been wasted. Secondly, the pay I shall earn will make things easier for them at home. And thirdly, if only I felt a bit more cheerful, as I shall do if I get that job, I do believe that this illness of mine would get better - and that would mean a great saving for my family on doctor’s fees and medicines.’
At that point Parfumee left her and continued on her way back alone. Fivey returned to the kitchen. She and her mother spoke warmly together of Parfumee’s kindness.
‘I’d never have thought anything like this would ever come our way,’ said Cook Liu. ‘Still, though it’s so precious, you can have too much of a good thing. You don’t want to overheat your blood. I think it would be rather a nice gesture if we were to pour a little of this off to give to someone else.’
Fivey asked her who she had in mind.
‘I was thinking of taking half a cupful to your uncle’s boy,’ said Cook Liu. ‘He’s been down with a fever this last day or two, and it’s just the sort of thing he would enjoy.’
Fivey made no reply and watched in silence while her rnother decanted a small quantity of the **red** liquid into a teacup and then placed the bottle, after corking it up again, on a shelf of the kitchen cupboard.
‘I think if I were you I *wouldn’t* give him that,’ she said finally. There was a wry little smile on her face. ‘If anyone should ask you where it came from, we might find ourselves in trouble.’
‘Oh, fiddlesticks!’ said her mother. ‘Surely we don’t have to be *that* careful? If you work as hard as I do all the year round, you are entitled to a few perks. No one is going to say that we stole it, surely?’
She sailed off cup in hand then to her brother’s, leaving Fivey alone in the kitchen. She found her nephew in

bed. He and his parents were all three delighted when they learned what she had brought them. A cupful of cool water freshly

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drawn from the well was mixed with a little of the essence and handed to the sick boy to drink. He finished it at one draught and immediately declared that he felt better and that his head seemed somewhat clearer. The cup containing the remainder of the essence was covered with a square of paper and set on the table beside him.

While Cook Liu was still there, some of the sick boy's workmates from the mansion called in to visit him. Among them was a young fellow called Qian Huai, related on his mother's side to Aunt Zhao. His father worked in Accounts. Qian Huai's own job was to accompany Jia Huan when he went to school. A bachelor and with money to spend, he had for long been an admirer of Fivey's and in time past his parents had, at his insistence, made several approaches to Fivey's parents through intermediaries asking for Fivey's hand in marriage. Her parents were by no means averse to the match, but as Fivey herself, though without actually saying anything, made it perfectly plain by her behaviour that the idea was repugnant to her, they had not dared to accept. More recently, with talk of Fivey going into service in the Garden, they had been less inclined than ever to look on Qian Huai as a possible son-in-law, for it now seemed probable that after four or five years' service as a maid, Fivey would be at liberty to marry someone of their own choice from outside. Qian Huai's parents, too, when they saw the way things stood, were inclined to let the matter drop.

Not so Qian Huai, however. Wounded in his *amour propre* by Fivey's rejection, he made a fierce vow that he would pursue her relentlessly, with all the force and guile at his command, until he had succeeded in making her his wife.

It was a surprise to him, needless to say, to call with the other pages on his sick workmate and find Fivey's mother at the bedside. Cook Liu was equally flustered on recognizing Qian Huai among the little group of visitors and got up to go, on the pretext of being busy.

'Do just stay for a cup of tea,' said her brother and sister-in-law. 'It was so kind of you to think of him.'

'I expect they'll he wanting their dinner inside now,' said

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Cook Liu. 'I'll come and see him again when I'm not so busy.'

The sister-in-law opened a drawer and took out a small paper packet from it as they were leaving. Outside, at the corner by the gate, she pressed it, smilingly, into Cook Liu's hand.

'This is something your brother brought back yesterday, from the gate. He was five days on duty there and not a single tip all the time. Then suddenly yesterday some high-up from Canton came here on a visit and left three little baskets of this white stuff - "Lycoperdon Snow" it's called - two for the masters and one for the people on the gate. This here is your brother's share of it. I opened it last night to have a look. It's beautiful stuff - so white and fine. They say that a little of it taken every morning mixed with breast-milk is wonderful for building up the body. If you can't get breast-milk, you can use cow's milk, or even plain boiled water. Of course, we immediately thought of your Fivey; it would be just the thing for her. I sent our little maid round with some this morning, but she said your door was locked. She said you must have taken Fivey in with you. I *would* have gone *in* then to see her and given it to her myself; but then I thought that with the mistresses away they're much stricter about letting people in and out now and they'd be sure to ask what business I had going inside. And besides, this last day or two we've heard rumours of such terrible goings-on in there, I should be afraid of getting mixed up in something. So it's a good job you came today, sister-in-law; you'll be able to take the packet to her yourself.'

Cook Liu thanked her and left. At the corner gate of the Garden her way was blocked by a grinning page.

'Where have you been, missus? There have been two or three calls from inside asking for you. Me and the others have been looking for you all over the place. Where have you just come from? You don't live out in this direction. I bet you've been up to something!'

'Cheeky little monkey!' said the cook.

The rest of their exchange is recorded in the following chapter.

CHAPTER 61

Bao-yu owns up to a crime he
did not commit
And Patience bends authority in order that
the innocent may be spared

Cook Liu was trying to get back into the Garden, but the bantering page-boy delayed her.
'You don't live in this direction. Naughty old Auntie! What have you been up to?'
"'Auntie" is it?' said Cook Liu, laughing. 'Cheeky little monkey! If your "auntie" has got herself a fancy man, that means you have a new uncle, so what are you worrying about? You open that gate quickly, my lad, and let me in, or I'll take hold of you by that little po-cover of yours and pull your hair out!'
'If I let you in, promise you'll pinch a few apricots for me,' said the boy, 'to make up for having kept me waiting so long. Mind you don't forget, now, or next time you want to nip out in the middle of the night for a bottle of wine or some oil, I'll not open for you. I'll just let you stand there shouting and not even answer you.'
'You must be mad!' said the cook. 'We can't do that sort of thing any more now. Nowadays it's all divided up among the garden-women; and there isn't one of them, either, that wouldn't just as soon scratch your eyes out as look at you. You only have to walk under one of the fruit-trees and they're watching you like hawks. Fat chance I should have of picking any of the fruit for you I only yesterday I was walking underneath a plum-tree and raised my hand to drive a bee away that was buzzing in front of my face. One of your old aunties happened to see me, but as she was quite a long way off, she couldn't quite make out what I was doing. She thought I was picking the plums. Oh, you should have heard her shout! "Don't take them! We

haven't offered the first-fruits yet. No one must have any of those plums until Their Ladyships have got back and made the offerings. You'll get your share in time." I suppose she thought I had a craving and couldn't wait! I'm afraid I wasn't very polite. I gave her a piece of my mind. You ask one of your old aunties if you want some fruit, my boy, it's no good asking me. You asking me for fruit is like the granary rat asking the crow for corn: Have asking Have-not!'
'Oh dear, oh dear!' said the boy sarcastically. 'If you can't get me any, you can't; there's no need to go on about it so. I suppose you think you won't be needing my services any more; but you will. When your Fivey gets her job inside, you're going to need my services more than ever.'
'Whatever rubbish will the boy come out with next?' said the cook. 'What job are you talking about?'
'It's no good pretending,' the boy crowed. '*I* know. You needn't think you're the only one with contacts inside. I've got my contacts too. I may be all the time working here outside, but I've got two girl cousins inside who keep me informed. There's nothing much going on inside there that I don't know about.'
At that point in their exchange they were interrupted by an old woman's voice from within:
'Come on, you little monkey, you let Mrs Liu in this minute! If she doesn't come in directly, they won't get their dinners in time.'
'Don't worry, I'm coming!'
Cook Liu brushed past the boy and, pushing the gate open for herself, went hurrying back to the kitchen. Several of her assistants were waiting there already. They had been standing about doing nothing, none of them having dared to take the initiative without her.
'Where's Fivey gone?' she asked them.
'She lust this minute went off to look for her cousins in the tea-room,' they said.
Cook Liu put the packet of Lycoperdon Snow somewhere to give to her daughter later and began making up the food-boxes for the different apartments. While she was engaged in

this work, Ying-chun's little maid Lotus arrived with a message from Chess.
'Chess says for dinner tonight she wants a bowl of egg-custard, lightly done.'
'That's a bit of a luxury just now,' said the cook. 'I don't know why it is, but for some reason hen's eggs seem to be in very short supply this year. Ten cash each they're charging for them at the moment, and even then you're lucky if you can find any. The other day, when they were making up a present for one of Her Ladyship's relations that had just had a baby, there were four or five of our buyers out scouring the markets for eggs. They had no end of a job getting together two thousand. So you can imagine what it must be like for me. Tell her to ask for eggs some other time.'
'The other day when she wanted bean-curd, you gave me some that was rancid,' said Lotus, 'and I got a telling-off for it. Now she wants eggs and you say you haven't got any. I bet I could find some here if I looked.'
She stepped over to the food-container and took the lid off. Among the other things revealed was a little cache of some ten or a dozen eggs.
'There you are, what are *they* then?' she said. 'Aren't you terrible? The food we eat is all paid for, I don't know why you're so grudging with it. It isn't as if you'd laid the eggs yourself!'
'I'll give you laying eggs, my girl! If anyone lays eggs around here, it'll be your mother! Those are the only eggs I've got left and I've been saving them up to use as garnishing on other dishes. Even then I'll only use them if the young mistresses ask for them specially. I need to have a few eggs by me in case of emergency. What am I going to do if one of the mistresses asks for some eggs and you lot have already eaten them all?

"What?" she'll say. "No eggs? Not even any eggs?" You people lead such soft, sheltered lives. All you've got to do is stretch your hands out for washing-water and your mouths open for food. You think eggs are the commonest things in the world, you don't realize there can be such things as shortages. Never mind eggs, the day may yet come when there's not even a corn-stalk to be had. My advice to you

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girls is to try and make do with what you're given. After all, you get the best quality white rice, and chicken and duck to eat every day. It's too much pampering that causes this passion for variety: eggs one day, bean-curd the next, fried pickled turnips in gluten batter ... It's all very well saying you want something different, but I'm afraid it won't do. If each lot wants something different, that's ten different dishes I've got to prepare. I might lust as well stop catering for the young mistresses altogether and do nothing but cook for you girls!'

Lotus went **red** and shouted angrily back at her.

'It's not true that we're always asking for something different. This rigmarole of yours is quite uncalled for. Anyway, it's your *job* to give us what we want. If that isn't your job, I'd like to know what is. You were obliging enough to Swallow the other day, when she came to say that Skybright wanted a dish of artemisia shoots. "With pork or with chicken?" you asked her. And when Swallow said Skybright didn't eat meat, she'd have it with wheat gluten, only not too much oil, "Oh," you said, "how stupid of me! I'd quite forgotten she was a vegetarian." You scurried off to wash your hands first before you cooked it, and when you'd cooked it, you carried it all the way there for her yourself, just like a little dog that runs wagging its tall to its master. Why you should pick on *me* to make an example of in front of all these people, I do not know.'

'Holy name!' said Cook Liu. 'These people here will be my witness. Whenever anyone from one of the other apartments, whether mistress or maid, asks me for a special order -and I'm not just talking about that occasion you mentioned, I'm talking about ever since this kitchen here first started -they invariably offer me something to cover the extra cost. Whether I have to buy anything extra or not, it's a nice gesture and I appreciate it. Some people think that as I only have the young ladies to cater for, I must make a lot out of it; but if anyone took the trouble to sit down and work it out, they'd get a shock. Between forty and fifty people I have to cater for, counting both mistresses and maids. And do you know what my daily allowance is? Two chickens,

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two ducks, ten catties of pork and a thousand cash worth of vegetables. You try managing on that! I can barely make it stretch to two meals a day provided everyone sticks to the egular menu; but if I'm going to have one person ordering one thing and one person ordering another, turning down the food I've bought for them and expecting me to buy other materials to make up their orders, my allowance simply won't stretch to it. If that's the way you want it, you'll just have to ask Her Ladyship to give you all bigger allowances; then we can do what they do in the main kitchen for Her Old Ladyship's meals: have a blackboard with the names of all the dishes under the sun chalked up on it and work through them one by one, having a different dish every day. Then you could settle with me for what you'd eaten at the end of each month. A week or two ago Miss Tan and Miss Bao suddenly thought they'd fancy a dish of salted bean-sprouts and Miss Tan sent one of the girls over with five hundred cash to ask me if I would prepare it for them. I laughed. "They'd never eat five hundred cash worth," I said, "not if they had bellies like the Laughing Buddha. Twenty or thirty cash would be ample." I sent the money back to her, but she wouldn't take it - said I should keep it to buy myself a drink with. "Now that the kitchen's inside," she said, "I expect you often have people coming round and asking you for favours." She said, "I know it's hard for you to refuse them, but even salt and soy sauce cost something, and we don't want you to end up out of pocket. Let's call this a payment to make up for some of the extras that other people have had out of you." Now there's a kind, understanding young lady! I praise the Lord in my heart for a young lady like that! Too bad that Mrs Zhao got to hear about it. She was furious, of course: thought I was doing far too well out of it. And sure enough she sent one of her little maids round less than ten days later asking for this and asking for that. I couldn't help laughing. You're just the same. I suppose you've taken a leaf out of her book. Well, it's no good. My allowance just won't stretch to it.'

Just then another messenger arrived from Chess to find out what had become of Lotus.

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'What's the matter?' the messenger asked her. 'Have you taken root or something? Why don't you come back?'

Lotus flounced off angrily after the messenger. The report that she gave when she got back was so highly embellished that Chess could hardly fail to be incensed by it. She was unable to do anything about it for the time being, because she was in the middle of serving Ying-chun her dinner; but as soon as Ying-chun's meal was over, she hurried off to the kitchen, taking several of the junior maids with her.

She arrived as the kitchen staff were having - their own dinner. The women, to whom it was obvious that

some kind of mischief was imminent, rose to their feet with nervous smiles on their faces and invited her to sit with them. Ignoring the women, she issued a brusque command to her minions:
'Right! Boxes, bins, cupboards - wherever the food's kept - throw it all out! Better the dogs eat it than these swindlers have it all I'
The young maids, needing no second bidding, threw themselves with great gusto into the work of ransacking the kitchen, while the women made vain efforts to restrain them and pleaded with Chess to call them off.
'You don't want to believe everything those young girls tell you, miss. Mrs Liu would never dare offend you, she knows it's more than her job is worth. She did say that eggs are hard to come by lately, it's true; but we told her that it was silly of her to take that line, and that if you say you want something, it's up to her to find some means of getting it for you, whatever it is. That's what we told her. She'd already admitted that she was in the wrong and put a basin of eggs in the steamer before you arrived. Look on the stove, if you don't believe us.'
Chess's anger subsided somewhat under these blandishments and the young maids were persuaded, albeit reluctantly, to discontinue their pillage. Chess continued to grumble for a bit and make unflattering remarks about the cook, but was eventually persuaded to return, while Cook Liu, with much banging of pots and pans and indignant muttering, set about making her a custard. When this was in due course delivered to her, Chess promptly emptied it on the ground,

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but the woman who had taken it prudently refrained from reporting this fact on her return for fear of provoking further unpleasantness.
When Fivey returned to the kitchen, her mother gave her some soup and a half a bowlful of congee and told her about the Lycoperdon Snow. Fivey, resolving to share the latter with her friend and benefactress Parfumee, wrapped half of it up m a separate sheet of paper and, having waited until it was dusk, when there were not many people about, made her way to **Green** Delights, keeping to the trees as much as possible, so that no one should see her. She managed to get as far as the gate of the courtyard without being stopped by anyone, but, not daring to go inside, retreated to the cover of some rose bushes and lurked there until someone should come Out.
Fortunately she did not have long to wait. After about the time it would take to drink a cup of tea Swallow came out of the gate and Fivey stepped out of the bushes and called to her to stop. Swallow could not at first make out who it was and had to go up close and scrutinize her before asking what she wanted.
'Will you tell Parfumee to come out for a minute, please?' said Fivey. 'I want to have a word with her.'
Swallow laughed softly.
'You're too impatient. Your business is sure to be settled within the next ten days, whatever you do. It's silly to keep on asking. Anyway, she's just gone out to the front, so you'll have to wait a bit. But perhaps it would be better if you gave me a message to pass on to her. If you wait till she comes back, you might find yourself inside still when they shut the gate.'
Fivey handed her the packet.
'This stuff is Lycoperdon Snow …'
She went on to explain what its properties were and how it was to be taken.
'I've just been given some and I want to share it with her. Would you mind giving it to her for me, please?'
Leaving the packet in Swallow's hands, she turned and began swiftly making her way back again. She had just got

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as far as the part of the Garden bordering Flowery Harbour when she saw Lin Zhi-xiao's wife at the head of a party of stewardesses coming towards her from the opposite direction. Concealment was impossible; there was nothing for it but to walk straight up to them and greet them.
'What are you doing, running around like this?' said Lin Zhi-xiao's wife. 'I thought you were supposed to be ill.'
Fivey forced herself to smile.
'I've been a bit better this last day or two, so Mother brought me into the Garden with her for a change of air. I've just been to **Green** Delights for her, to deliver something.'
'That can't be right,' said Lin Zhi-xiao's wife. 'I saw your mother go out of the Garden just now; that's why I shut the gate. If she'd really sent you to **Green** Delights, why didn't she tell me you were still inside? Why did she go out and let me lock the gate without saying anything? You must be lying.'
Fivey was momentarily at a loss for a reply.
'Actually she told me this morning but I forgot,' she stammered. 'I only just now remembered. Probably she didn't say anything about my being in here because she thought I'd already gone home.'
Observing her confusion and the halting nature of her reply, Lin Zhi-xiao's wife remembered that Silver had lately reported some things missing from Lady Wang's apartment which none of the other maids would admit to having taken and wondered if Fivey might be the thief. It was unfortunate for Fivey that Ciggy and Lotus, together with a number of older servants, should have arrived on the scene at that moment and helped

to confirm her suspicion.
'Give her a good grilling, Mrs Lint' said one of these new arrivals. 'She's been sneaking to and fro all over the place this last day or two. I don't know what she's been up to, but she's certainly been up to something.'
'Yes,' said Ciggy, 'and Silver told me yesterday that when they opened that cupboard in Her Ladyship's side room the other day they found a whole lot of things missing. They noticed there was a bottle short when Mrs Lian sent Patience over for some Essence of Roses, otherwise they'd never have thought of looking.'

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'Oh?' said Lotus with a pleased-looking smirk. 'I didn't know about that. As a matter of fact I've seen a bottle of Essence of Roses somewhere today.'
'Where?' Lin Zhi-xiao's wife asked eagerly. Ever since the bottle from Lady Wang's cupboard had been found missing, Xi-feng had been sending Patience round daily to inquire about the progress of her investigations and she was under great pressure to discover the thief.
'In her mother's kitchen,' said Lotus.
Lanterns were lit and the little party hurried off to investigate, Fivey protesting anxiously as they went:
'But that little bottle came from Master Bao's room. It was given to me by Parfumee.'
'Parfumy!' said Lin Zhi-xiao's wife contemptuously. 'If we find the evidence in the kitchen, I shall have to report it, and that's that. It will be up to you to explain yourself to the mistresses if you can.'
By now they had reached the kitchen and some of them, led by Lotus, went inside to look. They came out almost immediately with the bottle. Lin Zhi-xiao's wife, thinking that there might be other stolen articles in the kitchen, ordered a thorough search, in the course of which the packet of lycoperdon was discovered. Taking this and the rose essence as evidence, they now led Fivey off to face Li Wan and Tan-chun.
But Li Wan would not see them. Jia Lan was ill, and she was too busy looking after him to have time for household business. They should see Miss Tan about it, she said.
Tan-chun was not in the office, having already returned to her own apartment. Off they all trooped then to Tan-chun's place, where one of their number went inside to announce their business. The maids were all in the courtyard enjoying the cool evening air. Tan-chun was inside, washing her hair, they said. Scribe went indoors to report. It seemed an age before she re-emerged.
'I told Miss Tan. She said you'd better find Patience and ask her to see Mrs Lian about it.'
So off they went once more, this time to Wang Xi-feng's place, where they told their business to Patience. Patience,

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on going inside to report, found that her mistress had just gone to bed. Xi-feng heard her through, after which she gave judgement summarily as follows:
'Give the mother forty strokes, turn her out of the Garden, and make sure that she is never employed inside the Inner Gate again. Give Fivey forty strokes too and pack her off to the grange. They can either sell her or marry her to one of the hands.'
Patience relayed this verdict, word for word, to Lin Zhixiao's wife and the others waiting outside. Fivey, shocked and weeping, threw herself on her knees at Patience's feet and explained to her how Parfumee had given her the rose essence as a present.
'We can clear *that* up easily enough,' said Patience. 'All we've got to do is wait until we can ask Pafumee tomorrow to find out whether she gave it to you or not. But what about this lycoperdon stuff? That was brought here as a present for Their Ladyships. No one had the right to touch that before Their Ladyships had seen it.'
Fivey explained that the packet of powder came not from Lady Wang's store but from her uncle's share of the surplus that had been given as a douceur to the gate-people.
'That puts you in the clear then,' said Patience, smiling. 'It's beginning to look as if *you* are wearing the hat for someone else.' She turned to Lin Zhi-xiao's wife. 'It's too late to do anything about this now. Mrs Lian has just taken her medicine and gone to bed; I can't go pestering her about a little thing like this at this time of night. You'd better hand her over to the night watch and tell them to look after her until the morning. I'll explain it all to Mrs Lian tomorrow, and we'll see what we can do.'
Lacking the confidence to dispute this countermanding by Patience of her mistress's orders, Lin Zhi-xiao's wife conducted Fivey outside and handed her into the custody of the watch before continuing about her own business.
Though still unbound, Fivey was unable to move freely and was obliged to stay where she was put and listen to the ill-natured comments of the old women. Some of them, assuming as a matter of course that she was guilty, rebuked her for

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her misconduct; others complained of the trouble that

she was causing them.
'As if we haven't got work enough already, they have to give us this thief to mind,' they grumbled. 'If she does herself an injury or gives us the slip while we're not looking, *we* shall get into trouble!'
And those who in the past had got on badly with her mother rejoiced in the daughter's discomfiture and lost no opportunity of taunting and abusing her.
Poor Fivey! Her heart was full of the injustice of it, but there was no one to pour out her troubles to The hardships of that night were doubly distressing to a person of her weak and ailing constitution: no one to give her tea or even a cup of water when she was thirsty, no pillow or bedding for her to lie on - even if she had felt like sleeping. The wretched girl spent the whole night in almost continuous weeping.
The enemies of Fivey and her mother, disappointed that the sentence could not be carried out on them immediately and fearful that the morrow might bring some remission, rose up next morning at crack of dawn and went secretly to Patience, hoping, by means of bribes and flattery, to buy her over. They extolled her resoluteness and drew her attention to various past misdemeanours of Cook Liu in order to strengthen the evidence against her. Patience accepted their presents, listened politely to their advice, and as soon as they had gone, slipped quietly over to **Green** Delights and asked Aroma whether Parfumee had in fact given some Essence of Roses to Fivey.
'I certainly gave some to Parfumee,' said Aroma, 'but whether or not she passed it on to someone else, I couldn't say.'
She called in Parfumee to ask her. Pafumee, in some alarm, at once confirmed that she had given the bottle to Fivey and went off to tell Bao-yu what had happened. Baoyu was as shocked as she was.
'The Essence of Roses is no problem,' he said; 'but what about the Lycoperdon Snow? I'm sure what she told them about it was the truth, but if it gets known that her uncle took it while on duty, then *he's* going to get into trouble -which seems a rather poor exchange for his kindness.'

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He thought he had better see Patience himself and point this out to her.
'Look,' he said, 'the Essence of Roses can be accounted for easily enough, but that Lycoperdon Snow business still looks a bit fishy. Why don't you be a nice, kind girl, Patience, and tell them that the Lycoperdon Snow was given to her by Parfumee as well? Then that disposes of the whole affair.'
'That's all very well,' said Patience, smiling, 'but she told everyone last night that her uncle gave it to her. How can she now make out that she got it from you? And apart from that, don't forget that the bottle of Essence of Roses from Her Ladyship's room has still to be accounted for. If *this* isn't it, where are they going to look for it? It's not very likely that anyone else will own up to having taken it.'
Skybright stepped over at this point to join in the discussion.
'The Essence of Roses from Her Ladyship's place must have been stolen by Sunset to give to young Huan. It's as plain as the nose on your face. I don't understand why you're all making such a mystery of it.'
'I know that as well as you do,' said Patience, 'but it's not so simple. Silver, who was so worried about finding that bottle missing that she was in tears, did go, very quietly and nicely, and ask Sunset if she had taken it, and if Sunset had had the grace to say 'yes', Silver herself would have done nothing, and I'm quite sure that no one else would have made an issue of it. Who's going to stir up trouble about a little thing like that? But unfortunately not only would Sunset *not* admit to having taken it, but she even had the gall to accuse Silver of taking it herself. The two of them made such a hullabaloo between them that soon everyone in the household had heard about it. By that stage I couldn't ignore the matter any longer, even if I'd wanted to. I *had* to investigate it. And the first thing I found, of course, was that the one doing all the accusing was actually the thief. But without any evidence, there was nothing much I could do.'
'I can take responsibility for that too,' said Bao-yu. 'You can tell them I stole the bottle from Her Ladyship's room to give the girls a scare. Now everything is accounted for.'

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'No doubt it's an act of merit to clear someone else of suspicion,' said Aroma, 'but Her Ladyship won't be very pleased when she hears. She'll say you've been up to your old childish tricks again.'
'Oh, *that's* of no consequence,' said Patience. 'We could of course clear this matter up quite easily by looking for the stolen bottle in Mrs Zhao's room. The only reason I hesitate to do that is because I'm afraid it would make things difficult for a certain person whose feelings I do care about very much. I know *she* would be distressed, and the last thing I want to do is "damage the jade vase while trying to hit the mouse".'
She held three fingers up as she said this to indicate that it was Tan-chun she was referring to. Aroma and the rest nodded in agreement.
'That's true. Perhaps it *would* be better if Bao-yu took all the blame.'
'Yes,' said Patience, 'but at the same time I think we ought to call Sunset and Silver here and get this matter properly sorted out. We don't want whoever it is to think she can get away with it. If we do nothing, she's sure to think it's because we haven't the wit to find out rather than that it's for the reason I've just said, and she'll think she can go on stealing things with impunity.'
This being agreed on, Patience sent someone to call them over.

‘Well, you can stop worrying now, you two,’ she said when they had arrived ‘They think they’ve found the thief.’
‘Where is she?’ said Silver.
‘At the moment she’s in Mrs Lian’s room being questioned,’ said Patience. ‘She’s admitted taking everything they’ve asked her about. I happen to know myself that she didn’t take them and is only confessing because she’s frightened. Master Bao can’t bear the idea of an innocent person suffering and has already agreed to take responsibility for some of them. As regards the rest, I *could* tell them who the real thief is, but there are certain difficulties. One is that the real thief is a very good friend of mine. The other is that the receiver of stolen goods, who is a pretty poor specimen, is closely related to a very *nice* person who would be very much upset if all of this

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were to come into the open. It looks as if I shall have to ask Master Bao to take responsibility for the whole lot, so that *everyone* is clear of suspicion. Before I do that, however, there’s something I should like to be clear about first. Can I be sure, if I *do* ask him to do us this favour, that everyone is going to be a bit more careful in future? Because if not, then rather than stand by and see an innocent person suffer, I shall have to tell all I know to Mrs Lian.’
A blush had overspread Sunset’s face while Patience was saying this. Her natural decency suddenly getting the better of her compelled her now to speak.
‘Don’t worry, Patience. There’s no need for any innocent person to suffer and there’s no need for that other person you mentioned to be upset. *I* stole those things. It was because Mrs Zhao kept on at me to take them. I stole them to give to Huan. Even when Her Ladyship was here I often used to steal things for him, so that he could give them away to his friends. I thought that the fuss made when they found out that things were missing would die down in a day or two. I can’t stand by and let an innocent person take the blame. You’ll have to take me with you to Mrs Lian and let me make a clean breast of it’
Her courage took all of them by surprise.
‘You’re a good sort, Sunset, I always knew you were,’ said Bao-yu admiringly, ‘but there’s really no need for you to tell her. All I’ve got to do is say that I stole those things for a lark, to give you all a scare, and that now there’s been all this fuss about them, I feel I ought to own up. There’s only one thing, though. I really must ask you girls to be more careful in future, for all our sakes.’
‘I did it,’ said Sunset, ‘it’s up to me to face the music.’
Patience and Aroma disagreed.
‘That’s not the way to look at it at all. If you confess, they’re sure to worm something out about Mrs Zhao, and that will upset Miss Tan again when she gets to hear about it. You’d much better let Master Bao accept responsibility, so that everyone is cleared. Nobody except the few of us here knows the truth, so it’s terribly easy for him to do this. But as Master Bao says, you really will have to be more care-

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ful in future. If you *must* take anything, at least wait until Her Ladyship is here. When she is back, you can give the whole room away if you like, because then *we* shan’t be involved!’
Sunset hung her head and pondered for some moments before finally agreeing to go along with this.
When it was settled exactly what they should do, Patience went with Parfumee and the two maids from Lady Wang’s apartment to the watch-room, called out Fivey, and quietly instructed her to say that the Lycoperdon Snow as well as the Essence of Roses had been given to her by Parfumee. Fivey was deeply grateful. Patience next took Fivey with her to Wang Xi-feng’s place, where Lin Zhi-xiao’s wife and her helpers had already been waiting for some time with Fivey’s mother in their custody.
‘I brought her here first thing,’ Lin Zhi-xiao’s wife told Patience in reference to her prisoner. ‘As that left no one to get the lunch ready, I put Qin Xian’s wife temporarily in charge, so that the young ladies should get their meal on time.’
‘Who is Qin Xian’s wife?’ said Patience. ‘I don’t think I know her.’
‘She does night duty in the south corner of the Garden. She doesn’t do anything in the daytime: that’s probably why you don’t know her. Very high cheek-bones and big round eyes. She’s a very clean, lively little body.’
‘Yes, of course you know her, Patience,’ said Silver. ‘She’s the auntie of Miss Ying’s maid, Chess. Chess’s father works for Sir She, but her uncle and auntie work on this side of the mansion with us.’
Patience remembered with a laugh.
‘Oh, *that’s* who you’ve chosen! If you’d told me that, I should have known who you meant.’ She laughed again. ‘You’ve been a bit too quick with your appointment. It’s all cleared up now, this business. The waters have gone down and we can see the rocks. We know now who the real thief was who stole that stuff from Her Ladyship’s room. It was Bao-yu. He went round to Her Ladyship’s apartment some days ago and asked Silver and Sunset for something and just for a tease the silly girls said he couldn’t have it, because they

couldn’t give him anything while Her Ladyship was

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away. So he simply slipped in later on when they weren’t there and helped himself. When these two found the things missing, they were scared out of their wits. But as soon as Bao-yu heard that someone else had been accused of taking the things, he told me everything. He even brought them round to show me, so that I could see they exactly corresponded with what the girls had told me was missing. As regards the Lycoperdon Snow, that was something that Bao-yu had got from outside. He’s been giving it away to all kinds of people - not only in the Garden: one or two of the old nannies begged some off him to give to their relations outside and *they* have given it to other people as presents; and Aroma gave some of hers to Parfumee and that lot and they’ve been passing the stuff to and fro between themselves. So you see, it’s all over the place. The two baskets that were left in the jobs room the other day for Their Ladyships are still untouched. The seals on them haven’t been broken. So as far as *that’s* concerned, there are no grounds for a charge either. If you’ll wait here a few moments longer, I’m just going in to tell Mrs Lian about this and we’ll see what she says.’
Patience then went into the bedroom and repeated almost verbatim to Xi-feng what she had just been telling Lin Zhi-xiao’s wife.
‘That’s as may be,’ said Xi-feng when she had finished; ‘but we all know how ready Bao-yu is to cover up for other people. Someone only has to go to him with a hard-luck story - especially if there’s a bit of flattery thrown in with it - and he’ll own up to anything in order to get them off. If we believe him now, how are we going to deal with more serious cases later on? I think this needs going into more carefully. I think you ought to get hold of those girls from Her Ladyship’s apartment and - well, I wouldn’t say torture them exactly, but you could get them to kneel in the sun on broken china all day without anything to eat or drink. If one day doesn’t make them confess, just go on day after day until they do. They’re sure to give in sooner or later, even if they’re made of iron.’
‘And as for that Liu woman,’ she went on, ‘you know what

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they say. When flies gather on an egg, it’s generally a sign that there’s a crack in it. She may not have stolen anything in this instance, but I suspect she’s no better than she should be for all these people to be complaining about her. We’ll let her off the flogging, of course, but I still think we ought to dismiss her. Even in the Emperor’s court people get punished for what they call “guilt by association”, so she can’t complain if we sack her merely on suspicion.’
‘Yes, but why bother?’ said Patience. ‘They say that where mercy is possible, mercy should be shown. What better opportunity than this could you have of showing yourself merciful for once? Look at all the trouble you give yourself on account of these people, and they aren’t even your own household: it’s Lady Xing’s household that you really belong to. And where does it all get you, at the end of the day? All you do is build up a lot of resentment against your-self and turn a lot of nasty, spiteful people into your enemies. A person in your delicate health can’t afford to make enemies. Think of all the time it took you to conceive a man-child - and then to lose it after carrying it inside you for six or seven months! How do we know that that wasn’t brought on by too much worrying about this sort of thing? I think you ought to start straight away taking things a bit easier. Close your eyes to things a bit oftener. “What the eye doesn’t see the heart doesn’t grieve”!’
Patience’s little homily quickly won Xi-feng to a better humour.
‘All right,’ she said, laughing. ‘Do as you wish. *I’m* not going to get myself worked up about it.’
‘Now you’re talking sensibly,’ said Patience happily, and going out of the bedroom, proceeded to dispose of the business outside in the way she had all along intended to.
But more of that in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 62

A tipsy Xiang-yun sleeps on a
peony-petal pillow
And a grateful Caltrop unfastens
her pomegranate skirt

‘It’s the sign of a really thriving household,’ said Patience, ‘that their big troubles turn into little ones and their little ones into nothing at all. To make a great song and dance over a trifle like this would be plain ridiculous. You can take them both back to the kitchen. The mother is to keep her job. Qin Xian’s wife will have to go

back where she came from. There is to be no further mention of this matter. Let there be no slackening in the daily inspection of the Garden, though. That's most important.'
As she turned to go, Cook Liu and her daughter stepped quickly forwards and kotowed their thanks. Lin Zhi-xiao's wife then conducted them back to the Garden, after which she reported to Li Wan and Tan-chun on what had been decided. Both expressed satisfaction that the matter had resolved itself without further trouble.
The victory that had been gained by Chess and her faction was thus an empty one, and Qin Xian's wife, that aunt of Chess's whose installation in the kitchen had been the result of long and patient scheming, enjoyed only the briefest moment of triumph in her new position. Beginning in a great bustle with a general stock-taking of the kitchen's equipment and stores, she detected - or claimed to detect - various shortages in the latter. Two piculs of best rice were missing, she said; a month's supply of general purpose rice had been overdrawn; and the amount of charcoal was not what it was supposed to be. While so engaged, she was at the same time making discreet arrangements for the conveyance of various 'presents' (they included, by a strange coincidence, a pannier of charcoal and a load of rice) to Lin Zhi-xiao's quarters out-

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side; and there were to be presents for the clerks who worked in Accounts. She also prepared several dishes for a little repast to which she invited her new colleagues.
'Now that I've got this job, I rely entirely on your support to run things here,' she told them. 'So if there are any little matters that I fall down in, I shall look to you all to help me out.'
Suddenly, in the midst of this activity, new orders arrived:
'As soon as you have finished serving this lunch, you must leave. Liu has been cleared. They're putting her back in charge here.'
Stunned though she was by this news, the wretched woman had at once to begin packing her things, and soon, with drums muffled and colours furled, beat a hasty retreat from the kitchen. The things she had given away to others - pointlessly, it now appeared - had to be made good, in some cases by selling her own possessions. Even Chess, for all her fury, was powerless to help her.
Ever since the fuss made by Silver about the missing objects, Aunt Zhao, the secret recipient of many of the things which Sunset had stolen, had been living in fear of discovery. Each day, as she made her surreptitious inquiries about the current progress of investigations, she perspired afresh. When Sunset herself suddenly came in and announced that Bao-yu had owned up and that there was nothing more to fear, she was naturally very much relieved. The effect on Jia Huan, however, was somewhat different. He immediately became suspicious, and taking out all the things that Sunset had been at such pains to get for him, he threw them in her face.
'Two-faced thing!' he shouted. 'You *must* be thick with Bao-yu or he wouldn't have covered up for you. If you were prepared to take those things in the first place, you ought to have kept quiet about it and not told anyone. Now that you've told him, I don't want them any more. They would only remind me of your treachery.'
Sunset swore by the most desperate oaths that she had been faithful to him; she even wept; but Jia Huan was adamant.
'If it weren't that we used to be friends,' he said, 'I'd go straight along now to Aunt Lian and tell her that *you* stole

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those things. I'd tell her that you offered them to me, but I wouldn't take them. Think about that then, and consider yourself lucky to have got away with it!'
With those words he flounced out of the room, to the great indignation of his mother, who shouted after him angrily.
'Ungrateful little blackguard! What do you mean by it?'
Sunset meanwhile was weeping as if her heart would break. 'Poor child!' said Aunt Zhao, trying to comfort her. 'He doesn't appreciate you. But at least *I* know you are faithful to him. Let me look after these things for you. He's sure to come round to a more sensible way of thinking in a day or two.'
She would have taken them, but Sunset forestalled her, sweeping them angrily into a bundle, which, when no one was looking, she carried into the Garden and emptied out over the lake. Some of the things sank straight to the bottom, the rest floated about on the surface of the water. She was still angry when she went to bed, and cried all night long under the bed-clothes.
*
The day of Bao-yu's birthday arrived - the same day, it had been discovered, as that on which Bao-qin had hers. Because Lady Wang was away, rather less fuss was made of it than in previous years. There were the customary four kinds of birthday present from Abbot Zhang together with a new amulet to replace the one he had worn during the previous year, and from the monks and nuns of various temples a token share of the day's offerings accompanied by such other little gifts as the religious are wont to give on these occasions: little

figures of Old Longevity, sacred colour-prints, offertory scrolls, talismans inscribed with his personal star guardian, and annually renewable lockets inscribed with the current year-star. A number of the blind ballad-singers both male and female regularly patronized by the household called in to offer their colourful felicitations. His uncle Wang Zi-teng's family sent him the usual suit of clothes and two pairs of shoes and socks, together with a hundred little peach-shaped birthday cakes and a hundred little bundles of the finest 'silver thread' vermicelli. From his Aunt Xue he received exactly the same presents as from his uncle but in appropriately

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reduced amounts. The only other presents from senior members of the family were a pair of shoes from You-shi and a heavily-embroidered 'propitious encounter' purse with a tiny gold image of Old Longevity in it and a piece of Persian ware from Xi-feng. As in previous years, a distribution of alms was made on his behalf to the monks of various temples.

And then of course there were Bao-qin's presents; but to enumerate them as well would be tedious.

The presents which Bao-yu received from the girls were of a less formal nature and chosen more to mark the occasion than for their intrinsic value: a fan from one, a specimen of calligraphy from another, a painting or a poem.

On the morning of his birthday Bao-yu rose at dawn, and after completing his toilet, put on his most formal clothes and went out to the main front courtyard of the mansion, where Li Gui and three other of his grooms were waiting for him by a table they had' made ready with an incense burner and candlesticks and offerings as an altar to Heaven and Earth. Bao-yu lit some sticks of incense and made his prostrations, poured out a libation of tea, and burned the paper offerings and offertory scrolls. Then he went round to the Ning-guo mansion and kotowed his respects to the ancestors, first in the shrine and then in the hall. Emerging from the latter, he knelt down on the terrace outside and 'kotowed upwards' to his absent dear ones - Grandmother Jia, Jia Zheng and Lady Wang - rising on his knees after each prostration and lifting his clasped hands up in front of him. He called in at the main apartment on his way out and made his kotow to You-shi, after which he sat and talked to her for a bit before returning to Rong-guo House. His first visit there was to Aunt Xue, who made vigorous - though, of course, unsuccessful attempts to prevent his kotowing to her. After that he called on Xue Ke, who was slightly senior to Bao-yu but not enough to warrant an obeisance and whose efforts to prevent a kotow, therefore, were more successful. After exchanging a few words with Xue Ke, he went back into the Garden. There he found Skybright and Musk waiting for him. They were accompanied by two junior maids holding a **red** carpet which was intended

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for kneeling on. Attended by these four, he now proceeded to visit all those in the Garden beginning with Li Wan who were senior to himself. Then back to the mansion again and out through the inner gate to call on Nannie Li and three other of his former nannies, with each of whom he was expected to spend some time in conversation. On his way back the servants inside the Garden gate would have liked to kotow to him, but he would not let them; and when he was once more back in his room, Aroma and the other maids offered him only verbal greetings and did not attempt to kneel. Lady Wang had forbidden the maids to kotow to younger members of the family for fear it might shorten their lives.

Soon after this Jia Huan and Jia Lan arrived. Aroma prevented them from kneeling and made them sit down for a while. As soon as they had gone, Bao-yu declared himself tired out by all the walking he had done and put his feet up on the bed. But not for long. He had barely had time to drink half a cupful of tea when there was a confused sound of chattering and giggling outside and eight or nine maids burst laughing into the room. There was Ebony and Periwikkle and Kingfisher and Picture, Xing Xiu-yan's maid Signet, the nursemaid carrying Xi-feng's little girl Qiao-jie, and two of the maids from Lady Wang's room, Avis and Avocet. He noticed that they were carrying a **red** carpet between them.

'Where are the birthday noodles?' they said. 'See how your doorway is crowded with people who have come to wish you happy returns!'

No sooner were the maids inside than Tan-chun, Xiang-yun, Ba-qin, Xiu-yan and Xi-chun appeared behind them. Bao-yu hurried Out to greet them. 'How kind of you all to come!' he said, and as he ushered them inside, he called out to Aroma to get them all some tea. A great deal of polite tussling ensued before his guests could finally be persuaded to sit down. Aroma now brought in tea for them all on a tray; but they had taken no more than a sip of it when Patience arrived, dressed to the nines in all her finery, and Bao-yu had to get up once more and hurry out to greet her.

'When I went to Feng's place just now,' he said, 'the person who announced me told me that she couldn't see me, so I asked if I might see you instead. Why wouldn't you let me?'

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'The first time you sent in I couldn't come out because I was doing your Cousin Feng's hair,' said Patience. 'When you sent in the second time and said that you wanted me to receive you in her place, I naturally

couldn't let you because it would have been too great an honour. It is I who should kotow to you -which is what I have come to do now.'
'But that's too great an honour for me!' said Bao-yu, laughing.
Aroma nevertheless brought a chair over and made Bao-yu sit in it. Patience made him a curtsey. Bao-yu, already on his feet again, answered. it with a bow and pumped his hands. Patience went down on her knees. Bao-yu knelt down too. At once Aroma raised Patience to her feet, whereupon she curtseyed to Bao-yu once more and Bao-yu, who had got up when she did, answered her with another bow and another pumping of the hands.
'Now another one,' said Aroma smiling and giving him a nudge.
'Why?' said Bao-yu. 'We've finished.'
'She's finished making her birthday reverence to you,' said Aroma; 'but it's her birthday today too, so you still have to make yours to her.'
Bao-yu bowed again, delightedly.
'So it's your birthday too, Patience?'
Patience returned his bow with another curtsey.
Xiang-yun took hold of Bao-qin with one hand and Xiu-yan with the other.
'At this rate the four of you are going to be making reverences to each other all day long!'
'Oh, of course!' said Tan-chun. 'It's Cousin Xing's birthday as well. I'd quite forgotten.'
She turned to one of the maids:
'Go and tell Mrs Lian about this; and get them to send another lot of presents like the ones they did for Miss Qin to Miss Ying's apartment.'
The maid went off to do her bidding. Now that the fact that today was her birthday had become public knowledge, Xiu-yan was obliged to make a round of the apartments, bowing and kotowing to everybody, as Bao-yu had had to do before her.

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'Interesting, all these coincidences,' said Tan-chun. 'You expect a few birthdays every month; but it's only when you get a lot of people living together like us that you begin getting two or three of them on the same day. We even have a birthday on New Year's Day in this family: Yuan-chun's. She comes first in that as in everything else. I suppose that's what makes her so lucky. It was great-grandfather's birthday as well, New Year's Day. The fifteenth of the first month is Aunt Xing's birthday and also Cousin Chai's - another coincidence. The first of the third month is Mother's birthday. The ninth of the third is Cousin Lian's. We haven't got anyone with a birthday in the second month.'

'Yes you have,' said Aroma. 'Miss Lin's is in the second month, on the twenty-second. It's true there's no one of your surname, though.'

'My memory is hopeless I' said Tan-chun.
'Not at all,' said Bao-yu. He pointed smilingly at Aroma: 'She only remembers it because her own birthday is on that day.'

'Oh, you're on the same day as her, are you? I don't recollect your ever having come round and kotowed to me on that day,' said Tan-chun teasingly. 'And Patience: this is the first time I've heard that your birthday was today.'

'What sort of great ladles do you think we are to be bothering with birthdays?' said Patience. 'Kotows and birthday presents are not for the likes of us. My birthday is just another day, to be got through with as little fuss as possible. I don't suppose you'd ever have known about it at all if *she* hadn't let on. Now that you do know, I'll gladly come round and kotow to you when you get back later to your room.'

'I don't in the least want you to do that,' said Tan-chun. 'On the other hand, I should very much like us to celebrate your birthday for once. In fact, I shan't be content unless we do.'

'Hear, hear I' said Bao-yu and Xiang-yun.
Tan-chun gave instructions to one of the maids:

'Go to Mrs Lian and tell her, from us all, that we want to keep Patience with us for the day. Tell her we are going to pool together and celebrate her birthday.'

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The maid went off, laughing excitedly. It was some time before she returned with Xi-feng's answer.

'Mrs Lian says thank you very much for the honour you are doing her. She says she doesn't know what you will be giving Patience to eat, but provided you let *her* have some of it, she will agree to leave her here in peace.'

The cousins and maids all laughed when they heard this message.

'It so happens that, as the birthday noodles and all the other things needed for today's meals are being seen to by the big kitchen outside, the Garden kitchen has got nothing to do today,' said Tan-chun. 'So when we've

made our collection, we can give it to Cook Liu and get her to prepare this private party for us in the Garden kitchen.'
The others having readily agreed that this would be best, Tan-chun sent someone to tell Li Wan, Bao-chai and Dai-yu what had been decided and invite them to contribute. She also sent for Cook Liu and asked her to prepare a two-table banquet in the Garden kitchen. Somewhat puzzled by this request, Cook Liu pointed out that on this particular occasion the catering was all being done in the outside kitchen.
'Yes,' said Tan-chun, 'but this is only for us. Today is Patience's birthday and we want to pool together and have a special little party for her. So do something nice for us, will you? You can bring the bill to my place afterwards and I will give you the money.'
'Miss Patience's birthday today?' said Cook Liu. 'Well I never!' And she stepped briskly forward and made her a kotow. Patience bent over in confusion and raised her to her feet.
The cook hurried off to begin preparations. Tan-chun now invited Bao-yu to accompany her to the 'jobs room' and break his fast there with some noodles. Having first waited for Li Wan and Bao-chai to arrive, she sent someone to ask if Aunt Xue and Dai-yu would care to loin them. Now that the weather was warmer, Dai-yu's illness was very much better than it had been and she was able to come. With so many people in party dresses the crowded office was beginning to take on an unusually gay and festive appearance.

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> Unfortunately a formal present for Bao-yu - a handkerchief, a fan, some sticks of incense and a length of silk - arrived at that moment from Xue Ke, and Bao-yu had to abandon the female company of the office and go to take noodles with Xue Ke.

Since the Xue and Jia families each had a birthday on this same day, each was supposed to entertain the other with birthday wine. Accordingly, at about noon that day, Bao-qin was brought over by Bao-chai to make a birthday reverence to her elder brother and to wait on him and Bao-yu while they drank the wine. But Bao-chai was impatient of punctilio.
'There is no need for you to send our wine over there,' she told Xue Ke. 'This year at least we can dispense with those empty formalities. You can invite our employees from the shop in to help you finish it. Cousin Bao and I must go back to the Garden now. Excuse us for leaving you like this, but we have other people there waiting for us to entertain them.'
'I won't try to detain you then,' said Xue Ke politely. 'To tell the truth, our people from the shop will feel freer to call here when you are gone.'
Having apologized to Xue Ke on his own account, Bao-yu accompanied the two girls back into the Garden. As they passed into it through the corner gate, Bao-chai made the women there lock it up after them and hand her the key.
'Why is it necessary to lock *this* gate?' Bao-yu asked her. 'There are only a few people using it, and now that you and Aunt and Qin are all three living in the Garden, it must be an awful nuisance if you have to lock and unlock it every time you need to go and fetch something from your place outside.'
'One can't be too careful,' said Bao-chai. 'Look at all the incidents you people have been having during the past few days; yet not once have any of our people been implicated. I put that down entirely to the fact that this gate is kept constantly locked. If it were left open, other people besides us would want to use it for the convenience of taking short cuts; and as it would be too invidious to begin distinguishing between who might use the gate and who might not, it is better to keep it permanently locked and stop *everyone* using it, even though it means a certain amount of inconvenience for Mamma

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and me, because at least it ensures that when there is any trouble none of out people will be under suspicion.'
'You heard about the missing objects, then?' Bao-yu asked her.
'You mean the Essence of Roses and Lycoperdon Snow?' said Bao-chai. 'I don't suppose *you* would have known even about them if your own protege's had not been involved. No, I was thinking about something rather more serious than that -something which, for all our sakes, I hope will never come to light. If it does, a great many people will be implicated. I can tell *you* this, because you have nothing to do with the management of the household. I told Patience the other day too. Patience is an intelligent girl, and as her mistress cannot get about now, I thought *she* ought to know about it. As I say, I hope nothing will come of it; but if it does blowup, Patience will have been warned and will know how to safeguard herself against being wrongfully accused again. Bear in mind what I am saying so that you are warned, too, if anything should happen. But don't let anyone else know that I told you this.'
They had been approaching Drenched Blossoms while she was speaking. In the pavilion at the centre of the bridge a group of ten or so girls - Aroma, Caltrop, Scribe, Skybright, Musk, Paffumee, Etamine, Nenuphar and one or two others they could not identify - were leaning over the railings looking at the fish in the water below. As Bao-yu and his two cousins approached, they chorused out to them:
'The party's all ready in the Peony Garden. Hurry up and take your places!'
Taking the maids with them, the cousins made their way to the lakeside Peony Garden in the midst of which was the large, open summerhouse where the tables for the party had been laid. Even You-shi had been invited

and was already sitting there waiting for them. In fact, by now almost everyone had arrived except Patience herself.
Patience had intended to drop in only briefly at Xi-feng's house in order to change into something more suitable for the party; but no sooner had she reached it than presents began arriving from the Lin and Lai households. The bearers of these proved to be only the forerunners of a stream of

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callers from every level of the domestic staff, who arrived in twos and threes, bringing her gifts or offering their congratulations. Patience was kept continuously busy dealing with these callers, rewarding the deliverers of gifts, thanking those who had come in person to felicitate her, and running in and out to show her presents to Xi-feng. She kept only a few of these for herself; the rest she either courteously returned or immediately gave away. Even when she had finished with her visitors she had to serve Xi-feng her lunch of noodles and wait until she had finished it before she was at last able to get changed and hurry back into the Garden.

A number of maids who had been sent out by the others to look for her took charge of her as she entered it and carried her off to the summerhouse. It was a dazzling sight there that met her eyes: not perhaps the

chelonian tables, lotus-cushioned chairs

of the poet; but no effort had been spared to make it an eye-catching and appetizing spread.
A friendly laugh greeted her arrival.
'Now all the birthday folk are here!'
They wanted to make her and the other three – Bao-yu, Bao-qin and Xiu-yan - sit at the head of the feast, but as Aunt Xue was present, all four of them naturally refused.
'A slow old buffer like me is no fit company for you young people,' said Aunt Xue. 'I should only feel uncomfortable if I stayed. Let me go and lie down in the jobs room. I don't feel like eating anything and I'm not much of a drinker. You will be much better able to look after your guests if I am not here.'

You-shi and the others loudly insisted that she should stay. Only Bao-chai dissented.
'Whether or not we should get on better without Mamma,' she said, 'I'm sure Mamma herself would be happier lying down in the jobs room than sitting here with us. If there is anything here she fancies, we can have it sent over to her and she will be able to eat it there on her own in comfort. Besides, there is no one in charge there at the moment. If Mamma is there, she will be able to keep an eye on things.'

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'Oh well, in that case we'll let her go,' said Tan-chun smiling. 'Obedience is the best obeisance, as they say.'

She went with the others to escort her aunt to the jobs room and personally supervised the arrangement of various pillows and cushions by the junior maids.

'Now,' she said to these junior maids when Aunt Xue had been comfortably settled, 'if you will stay here and massage Mrs Xue's legs for her and fetch her tea or anything when she asks you without making up all sorts of wonderful excuses, I shouldn't be surprised if later on, when we send some nice things for her to eat, she doesn't give some of them to you. So mind you don't go away!

The girls all promised that they would stay.

When they got back, Tan-chun made Bao-qin and Xiu-yan sit at the head of the top table and Patience and Bao-yu at right-angles to them on the left and right ends. She and Faithful sat shoulder to shoulder on the fourth side, facing Bao-qin and xiu-yan. At the table parallel to the west wall Bao-chai, Dai-yu, Xiang-yun, Ying-chun and Xi-chun sat in order of seniority on the two longer sides and Caltrop and Silver on the shorter sides, one at either end. You-shi and Li Wan sat at the longer sides of the table parallel to the east wall, with Aroma and Sunset to left and right of them on the shorter sides. The fourth table was occupied by the remaining maids, Nightingale, Oriole, Skybright, Periwinkle and Chess, sitting around it in no particular order.

No sooner were they all seated than Tan-chun rose to her feet again, wine-kettle in hand, intending to drink toasts with each of the four 'birthday people'; but the birthday four, realizing that if they allowed one of their hosts to do this, a dozen or more would follow, objected strenuously.

'If you are going to start this nonsense,' said Bao-qin, 'we shall none of us get settled until evening.'

The point was taken and Tan-chun sat down again, whereupon the blind ballad-singers, who had tagged along with the others, began tuning their instruments for a birthday ode. This time everyone objected.

'None of us like that old stuff. Why don't you go to the jobs room and entertain Mrs Xue?'

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While they were about it, they made a selection from the various dishes on the table for the people conducting the blind women to take with them to Aunt Xue.
‘Just sitting here making polite conversation is not going to be much fun,’ said Bao-yu when the singers had been disposed of. ‘We ought to play a drinking game.’
Various suggestions were made) but none met with everyone’s approval.
‘I’ll tell you what,’ said Dai-yu. ‘Why not write the names of different games down on slips of paper and put it to the draw?’
‘Good ideal’ said the others, and sent for an inkstone and writing-brush and some slips of fancy paper.
To Caltrop, who in addition to writing poetry had lately been learning some calligraphy, the opportunity of exercising her new skill proved irresistible and she jumped up and insisted on doing the writing. After thinking for a bit, the company managed to produce some ten or more names of drinking games which Tan-chun dictated one by one to Caltrop to write down on the slips. The slips were then folded up small, doubled over, and thrown into a jar. Tan-chun asked Patience to draw. She did so with a pair of chopsticks, stirring the slips around with them before fishing one out for her inspection. Tan-chun unrolled it and read it out.
‘Cover-ups.’
‘Cover-ups?’ said Bao-chai, laughing. ‘Why, that’s the grandfather of them all! They played “cover-ups” in ancient times. Admittedly, we don’t know exactly how they played it then and our modern “cover-ups” is a comparatively recent invention; but it’s still very, very difficult. I should think at least half the people here wouldn’t know how to play it. We’d much better set that one aside and pick something a little less literary that everyone can understand.’
‘We can’t set it aside now that it’s been drawn,’ said Tanchun. ‘I suggest that we draw again, and if it’s the sort of game that everyone can enjoy, those who want to can play that game while the rest of us are playing cover-ups.’
This time she got Aroma to draw. The name on the slip she picked out was ‘guess-fingers’. Xiang-yun greeted it with approval.

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‘Now there’s a nice, simple, lively game! There’s a game that suits me down to the ground! None of your stuffy old cover-ups for me! The very thought of it gives me a headache! *I’m* for guess-fingers!’
‘Isn’t it just like her to reduce the entire party to anarchy before we have even begun I’ said Tan-chun. ‘Cousin Chai, you must sconce her for me.’
Bao-chai forthwith obliged by forcing a whole cupful of wine down Xiang-yun’s throat.
‘Now,’. said Tan-chun, herself gulping down a little wine, ‘I’m your M.C. I take it you don’t need me to read the rules out. You just have to do as I tell you. We’ll get someone to fetch dice and a cup and each of us will throw in turn, beginning with Cousin Qin. Anyone who throws the same number as someone else will pair with that person for cover-ups.’
Bao-qin threw a three. The others on the top table each threw a different number. Caltrop on the second table was the first to throw another three.
‘We’d better confine ourselves to objects inside this room, don’t you think?’ Bao-qin suggested. ‘Otherwise the range of possibilities will be too large.’
‘Certainly,’ said Tan-chun. ‘And whoever hasn’t given the right answer after three guesses must drink a cup of wine as a penalty. You begin.’
Bao-qin thought for a bit.
‘Market.’
Caltrop, who was new to this game, could see nothing in the room which could combine with ‘market’ to make a quotation; but Xiang-yun, whose eyes had been darting busily around from the moment the clue was announced, happened suddenly to catch sight of the inscription that hung up over the door:

PEONY GARDEN

She guessed at once that Bao-qin must be thinking of the passage in the thirteenth book of the *Analects* where Confucius tells a person who wanted to study horticulture that he would ‘much better go to some old fellow who kept a market garden and learn about it from him’. As Caltrop could still not guess

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what the ‘market’ indicated and the others were beginning to drum her for an answer, Xiang-yun, who had already thought of a matching quotation from a line in one of Wang Wei’s poems

Sometimes I to my herb garden repair

leaned over and whispered to Caltrop to give ‘herb’ as her reply. But Dai-yu had spotted her and was quick

to tell the others.
'You'll have to sconce her again. She's been telling her how to answer.'
Xiang-yun was obliged to down another cupful of wine. She was so vexed that she rapped Dai-yu on the knuckles with a chopstick. Caltrop, too had to drink a sconce.

The next pairing occurred when Bao-chai threw the same number as Tan-chun. Tan-chun's clue was 'man'.

'Isn't that a bit wide?' said Bao-chai.
'All right,' said Tan-chun. 'I'll give you another clue. That should narrow it down a bit. "Shut".'
Bao-chai thought for some moments. There was certainly plenty of chicken-meat on the table. Tan-chun must be referring to 'cock-man' from Wang Wei's

The red-capped cock-man has proclaimed the dawn and 'cock-shut' from Luo Yin's

At cock-shut still upon my book to pore.

She therefore countered with 'niche', basing herself on a line from the sixty-third poem in the *Poetry Classic:*

The cock roosts in his niche.

The two girls smiled at each other and each took a sip of wine in celebration of a successful turn.

Xiang-yun, unwilling to wait longer, was already in the midst of a game of guess-fingers with Bao-yu. The two of them were both shouting at the tops of their voices. At the other side of the room You-shi and Faithful were also shouting at each other 'Five-a, *five-a!'* 'Seven-a, seven-a?' 'Eight-a, eight-a!'from their separate tables, while Patience and Aroma, sitting at adjacent ends of the same two tables, made up another

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pair and contributed to the noise. To the racket made by their shouting was added, in the case of the five female players, the clashing of bracelets every time they gestured. Soon Xiangyun had beaten Bao-yu and Aroma had beaten Patience. It was agreed that the losers should drink a cup of wine each and do something before and something after drinking it: the question was, what? Xiang-yun had plenty of suggestions for Bac-yu.

'Before drinking you must give a well-known quotation in prose, a well-known quotation in verse, a dominoes threesome, a song-title, and the day's forecast from an almanac, all five to hang together so that they make continuous sense. After drinking you must give the name of some food you see here on the table which can be used in more than one sense.'

The others laughed.

'No one but her could think up such a rigmarole,' they said. 'Still, it should be interesting.'

They began urging Bao-yu to start.

'Have a heart?' said Bao-yu. 'I need a bit of time to think if I'm to get through that lot.'

'Drink the wine,' said Dai-yu. 'I'll do the rest for you.'

Bao-yu drank his cup obediently and listened.

'One. "Scudding clouds race the startled mallard across the water",' said Dai-yu. 'Two. "A wild goose passes, lamenting, across the wind-swept sky." Three. It must be "The wild goose with a broken wing". Four. So sad a sound makes "The Heart Tormented". Five. "The cry of the wild goose is heard in the land."'
The others laughed:
'It certainly makes good sense!'

Dai-yu picked up a hazel-nut.

'This cob I take up from the table
Came from a tree, not from a stable.'

The other losers, Faithful and Aroma, were let off more lightly, being required to produce only a single well-known saying which had some bearing on birthdays. In the interest of economy their answers are omitted from this narrative.

A brief interlude of confusion followed while the next round

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of pairings was being decided. It was resolved that Xiang-yun should play Bao-qin now at guess-fingers

and Li Wan, who had just thrown the same number as Xiu-yan, should play Xiu-yan at cover-ups. Li Wan was to begin.

'Gourd,' said Li Wan.

'**Green**,' said Xiu-yan.

'Green' was evidently correct, since Li Wan appeared to be satisfied and the two young women simultaneously sipped their wine.

Meanwhile Xiang-yun had lost to Bao-qin at guess-fingers and was asking what she should do for a forfeit.

'You know what Lai Jun-chen said when he showed Zhou Xing the fiery furnace that Zhou Xing himself had designed,' said Bao-qin: '"Please step inside I" I think that's what I should say to you now. Why don't you do the forfeit that *you* designed for Bao-yu?'

The others apart from Xiang-yun appreciated the aptness of the historical allusion. Xiang-yun began answering without delay.

'One. "A swift-rushing swirl and shock". Two. "The sky rocks and heaves in the river's swelling waters". Three. Better have "The lone boat tied with an iron chain". Four. And since there is a "Storm on the River". Five. "This will be a bad day for travelling."'

By the time she had finished, the rest of the company were all laughing.

'That sounded a bit contrived I' they said. 'She must have thought the forfeit up for the express purpose of getting in her joke. - Come on!' they said to Xiang-yun. 'Let's have the second half.'

From the dish in front of her Xiang-yun picked out a duck's head with her chopsticks and pointed it at the maids who were sitting round the fourth table at the other end of the room.

'This little duck can't with those little ducks compare:

This one is quite bald, but they all have a fine head of hair.'

There was even more laughter at this, but the maids pretended to take offence and Skybright and Periwinkle came over to her table to protest.

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'It's all very well for Miss Yun to have her joke, but she ought to leave *us* out of it. You ought to make her drink another sconce now, as a punishment. And while she's about it, she might give us a nice bottle of hair-oil each by way of compensation.'

I dare say she would be glad to,' said Dai-yu drily. 'The trouble is that if she starts giving bottles of hair-oil away, she will probably find herself on the carpet for stealing them.'

The remark passed unnoticed, with two exceptions. The exceptions were Bao-yu, who, assuming that it must refer to his supposed theft of the Essence of Roses, held his head down and said nothing, and Sunset, the real thief, whose face turned **red** with embarrassment. Bao-chai stared at Dai-yu reprovingly, whereupon Dai-yu, who had intended no more than a mild joke at Bao-yu's expense, realized too late that Sunset must inevitably have construed it as a spiteful reminder of her guilt. She attempted to distract attention from it by applying herself, with somewhat unnatural vigour, to the game of guess-fingers.

The next pairing to be determined by the dice was that of Bao-chai and Bao-yu. The clue Bao-chai gave Bao-yu for her cover-up was 'precious'. After puzzling over it for some moments, Bao-yu felt sure that it was a leg-pull. His own name meant 'Precious Jade'. No doubt the object she had in mind was the jade he always wore round his neck and she was using his own name for her clue. Very well, he would answer her in kind.

'I take it that you are making free with my name,' he said. 'I hope that you won't be offended then if I make just as free with yours. "Bao-chai" means "Precious Hairpin", so I shall borrow your "hairpin" for my answer. "Jade hairpin" comes in a line by some Tang poet:

The candle burnt out and the jade hairpin broken. It is "jade", isn't it, in your cover-up?'

'I protest,' said Xiang-yun. '"Precious jade" isn't a quotation. You're supposed to use only quotations in this game. We ought to sconce them both.'

"'Precious jade" does come from a quotation,' said Caltrop.

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'Surely not?' said Xiang-yun. 'I'm prepared to admit you might find it on a New Year scroll or something of that sort, but not in any work of literature, surely?'

'I came across "precious jade" only the other day in a poem by Cen Shen,' said Caltrop:

'Since in that land much precious jade is found.

I'm surprised you don't remember it. And not long afterwards I came across "precious hairpin" in a poem too -

a poem by Li Shang-yin:

The precious hairpin gathers dust.

I remember being very much amused at the time to think that Master Bao's and Miss Bao's names are both to be found in poems of the Tang dynasty.'

'So much for your objection I' said the others to Xiang-yun, laughing. 'It's *you* who must drink the sconce.'

It was useless to argue: Xiang-yun had to drink another cupful.

The whole company now paired off for guess-fingers. With Grandmother Jia and Lady Wang away, the girls felt free to make as much noise as they liked. Coloured sleeves flashed, bracelets jangled, earrings shook, hair ornaments nodded in time to the shrieked-out numbers. In such a bedlam almost anything would have passed unnoticed; and it was only when they had tired of playing and broken off for a rest that they suddenly became aware that Xiang-yun was no longer with them. At first they assumed that she must have slipped out to answer a call of nature; but when, after they had waited for quite some time, she had still not reappeared, they sent some of the maids out to look for her. The search proved fruitless. Xiang-yun had vanished without a trace.

At this point Lin Zhi-xiao's wife arrived, accompanied by several of the old women under her command. She had come partly Out of a genuine desire to be useful but much more because she regarded the maids as young and giddy creatures who would take advantage of Lady Wang's absence to play their young mistresses up by drinking more than was good

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for them and behaving riotously. Tan-chun was fully aware of this and let her know that she was.

'I see you still don't trust us, Mrs Lin. I assure you, though, that we haven't been drinking very much. We're only enjoying ourselves: the wine has been a very small part of it. You really have no cause to be worried.'

Li Wan and You-shi added their reassurances.

'Go and rest, Lin. *We* wouldn't let them drink too much, I promise you.

The women laughed.

'I know you wouldn't,' said Lin zhi-xiao's wife. 'Even when Her Old Ladyship encourages them to, the young ladies don't drink very much, so I know they'd be even less inclined to overdo it when Their Ladyships are away. It wasn't because of *that* I came; it was just that I thought there might be something you needed me for. Also, as it's a long way yet to dinner-time and you've been at it quite a long while now, I thought it was time you had a bite of something. I know you don't normally go in much for snacks between meals, but when you've been drinking, you really need to get a bit of food inside you so that it does you no harm.'

'You are quite right,' said Tan-chun. 'In fact, we were just thinking of having something when you came.'

She turned to the maids behind her and told them to fetch some light refreshments from the kitchen. There was an answering cry from all sides and a few of them went off to do her bidding.

Tan-chun smiled courteously at the women.

'Do please go and rest now. Or perhaps you would like to go and keep Mrs Xue company? We'll send some wine there presently for you to drink.'

'Oh no, miss, we wouldn't presume!'

She and the women stood talking a little longer before finally taking themselves off.

Patience put her hand to her cheek and laughed.

'My face is so hot, it must be terribly **red.** I wish they hadn't seen me like this. I think we ought to stop now. If we give them an excuse for coming back again it will be really embarrassing.'

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'Nonsense!' said Tan-chun. 'As long. as we don't do any serious drinking, it's perfectly all right.'

'Come and look, everyone!' - They were interrupted by a giggling young maid - 'Miss Yun must have been feeling drunk and gone out for some air. She's lying on the granite bench behind the rockery, fast asleep.'

'Let's be quiet and not waken her,' the others said amidst laughter, and followed her outside to have a look.

They found Xiang-yun where the maid had said, on a large stone bench in a hidden corner of the rockery, dead to the world. She was covered all over from head to foot with **crimson** petals from the peony bushes which grew round about; the fan which had slipped from her hand and lay on the ground beside her was half buried in petals; and heaped-up peony petals wrapped in a white silk handkerchief made an improvised pillow for her head. Over and around this petalled monstrosity a convocation of bees and butterflies was hovering distractedly. It was a sight that the cousins found both touching and comical. They made haste to rouse her and lifted her up into a half-sitting position on the bench. But Xiang-yun was still playing drinking games in her sleep and proceeded to recite the words of an imaginary forfeit, though her eyes were tightly closed.

'One. "The spring water being sweet, the wine is good." Two. "Pour me its liquid amber in a jade cup." Three. We'll drink till we see "The moon above the plum-tree bough". Four. Then, as we're "Rolling Home". Five. It

will be “A good time to meet a friend.”‘
They shook her, laughing.
‘Wake up! Wake up! Come and have something to eat. Lying on the damp stone like this you’ll make yourself ill.’
Xiang-yun...

uplifted slowly then those orbs serene

and saw the faces of the cousins bending over her. Then she looked downwards and saw her own body and the place where she had been lying. She could remember escaping from the noise to rest for a few moments somewhere where it was cool and quiet. Evidently the wine from all those sconces she

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had been made to drink must have got the better of her and caused her to drop off. Ashamed to have been discovered in such a predicament, she struggled hastily to her feet and accompanied the others back to the summerhouse, where she rinsed her mouth out with water and drank two very strong cups of tea. Tan-chun made one of the girls fetch a piece of ‘hangover rock’ for her to suck. By the time she had sucked the rock for a bit and taken a few mouthfuls of hot, sour soup, she was feeling almost herself again.

A selection was now made of the various comestibles on the tables and sent over to Xi-feng, who reciprocated by sending them some delicacies of her own. Bao-yu and the girls then took some sustenance themselves, after which they broke up into little groups, standing or sitting where they pleased and amusing themselves as the fancy took them. Some went outside to admire the peonies or to lean on the balustrade at the edge of the lake and look at the fish swimming in the water below. Tan-chun and Bao-qin stayed indoors to play Go. Bao-chai and Xiang-yun stayed indoors to watch them. Dai-yu and Bao-yu went outside and, having found themselves a little flowering arbour that they could stand and talk in, appeared to be completely engrossed in their conversation.

While everyone was thus engaged, Lin Zhi-xiao’s wife and her party appeared once more, bringing with them a tearful, woebegone woman, who, as they reached the steps that led up to the summer-house, threw herself down on her knees, not daring to go further, and began knocking her head upon the ground. Meanwhile Tan-chun continued. to stare concentratedly at the Go-board, one outstretched hand feeling for the spare pieces in the box while she contemplated her next move. One of her pieces had been threatened, and though she could see how to get the two ‘eyes’ easily enough, she could not, however hard she tried, think of a way of doing so which did not break the development she had planned. It was some minutes before she looked up and, in turning to ask for some tea, caught sight of Lin Zhi-xiao’s wife, who had all this time been standing there beside her, and asked her what she had come for.

Lin Zhi-xiao’s wife pointed to the kneeling woman.

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‘This is the mother of Miss Xi-chun’s maid, Landscape. She works in the Garden. She’s been using some very bad language. I heard her just now and asked her what she meant by it, but what she said to me, miss - well, I wouldn’t like to soil your ears by repeating it. I think she ought to be dismissed.’
‘Why didn’t you see Mrs Zhu about this?’ said Tan-chun.
‘I did, miss. I ran into her just now on her way to the jobs room to join Mrs Xue. She said I was to tell you.’
‘Shouldn’t you tell Mrs Lian?’
‘No need,’ said Patience. ‘I can tell her about it when I get back.’
Tan-chun nodded.
‘All right, dismiss her then. We’ll tell Lady Wang about it when she comes back and get her to confirm it.’
She turned once more to her game. Lin Zhi-xiao’s wife and her party moved off, taking the offender with them.

All of this scene was clearly observed by Bao-yu and Dai-yu from their flowering covert, though they were too far away to hear what was said.
‘What a curiously detached person your sister is!’ said Dai-yu. ‘She has been actually invited to take charge of things, yet she still won’t go a step beyond what is absolutely necessary. Most people in her position would have been throwing their weight about long ago.’
‘Ah, you don’t know what’s been going on while you were away,’ said Bao-yu. ‘While you were ill in bed, she did in fact do a great deal of managing. For example, she divided this Garden into sections and put each section under someone’s supervision. Nowadays you can’t even pick a flower in it without permission. And she cut down on a lot of things too -mostly things that Feng or I had asked for, as an awful example to the others. Oh no, Tan has got very strong views on domestic economy. I certainly wouldn’t call her “detached”.’
‘I’m very glad to hear it,’ said Dai-yu. ‘We are all *much* too extravagant. Although the management of the household is not my business, I have frequently, just out of curiosity, made a few calculations, and I can see that our expenditure is vastly in excess of our income. If we go on in this way without econo-

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mizing, the time will surely come when our credit is exhausted.'

'Even if it does,' said Bao-yu gaily, 'I don't suppose you and I will have to go short.'

Dai-yu turned away from him somewhat impatiently and began walking towards the summerhouse, intending to seek Bao-chai's company inside. Bao-yu would have gone too, but just at that moment Aroma came up carrying a little varnished wooden 'tea for two' tray, in each of whose rounds nestled a cup of freshly made tea.

'Well, where's she gone?' said Aroma. 'I brought this out specially, because I could see the two of you standing here all this time without anything to drink; but now she's not here.'

'That's her, over there,' said Bao-yu, removing one of the cups for himself. 'You can take it to her inside.'

Aroma did so, but by the time she had reached her, Dai-yu was already standing talking to Bao-chai.

'Here you are,' said Aroma, 'whichever of you is the thirstier had better take this while I go and fetch another.'

'I'm not thirsty,' said Bao-chai. 'I only want enough to wash out my mouth with.'

She lifted the cup to her lips, drank a mouthful of tea from it, and handed the remainder to Dai-yu.

'Let me get you another cup,' said Aroma.

'Oh, you know me,' said Dai-yu smilingly. 'I can't drink much tea because of my illness. The doctor says it's bad for me. This half cup will be quite enough for me. Thank you very much, though. It's very kind of you.'

Having drained the cup, she put it back on the tray, whereupon Aroma went off to collect the other cup from Bao-yu.

'Where's Parfumee?' Bao-yu asked her when she got back to him. 'I haven't seen her for a long time.'

Aroma looked around.

'She was here a moment ago. I saw her playing match-my-flower with some of the others. Now she seems to have disappeared.'

Bao-yu hurried back to his room to look for her. He found her asleep on the bed with her face turned inwards to the wall.

'Come on, you mustn't sleep!' he said. 'Come out and get

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some exercise. We'll be eating soon. You want to get an appetite for your food.'

'Why shouldn't I sleep?' said Parfumee. 'There's nothing else for me to do. I got so bored when you all went off drinking and left me on my own.'

Bao-yu laughed.

'We'll be having a party of our own here in the evening,' he said, pulling her to her feet. 'I'll ask Aroma to let you sit at table. with the rest of us, shall I?'

'Not on my own,' said Parfumee. 'I shouldn't enjoy it unless Nenuphar and Etamine could be with me as well. Besides, I don't like noodles. I didn't have a proper lunch today because I couldn't eat the noodles. I got so hungry that just now I asked Liu to do a bowl of soup and some rice for me to eat here now; so I shan't want anything again tonight. I could just drink, I suppose; but if you want me to, you'll have to let me drink as much as I like and not let the others fuss over me. When I was still at home I used to drink two or three catties of rice wine at a sitting, but once I started learning beastly opera, they wouldn't let me drink any more in case it spoiled my voice. During this last year or two I haven't had so much as a smell of it. Tonight I should like to celebrate the end of all that.'

'So you shall,' said Bao-yu.

At that point a woman arrived from Cook Liu with a food-box containing Parfumee's order. Swallow relieved her of it and brought it inside. It contained a bowl of shrimp-balls in chicken-skin soup, a bowl of duck steamed in wine, a plate of **red** salted goose-slices, another plate on which were four cream-cheese rolls stuffed with pine-kernels, and a large bowl of delicious, steaming-hot, fragrant **green** rice. Swallow put these all on the table in front of Parfumee and fetched her a spoon, chopsticks and some bowls, one of which she filled for her with the fragrant rice.

'Ugh I' said Parfumee. 'How can I eat this horrible greasy *stuff?'*

She spooned some of the soup onto her rice and picked up a couple of goose-slices with her chopsticks to put on top of it. The rest she left untouched. Bao-yu sniffed the rejected dishes. They smelt delicious - much nicer than the things *he*

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generally had to eat. He helped himself to one of the pine-kernel rolls and told Swallow to fill him another bowl with some rice and pour on some of the soup. The combination -soup, rice, and pine-roll - was quite delectable. Parfumee and Swallow both laughed as they watched him eat.

When he and Parfumee had both finished, Swallow would have sent the remainder back to the kitchen, but Bao-yu told her that she should eat it herself.

'If it's not enough, we'll ask them to bring you some more.'

'No, no, this will be plenty,' said Swallow. 'It's not long since Musk brought me some cakes and things from

the party. If I eat this now, I shall have had quite enough.'
She proceeded to tuck in there and then, standing where she was beside the table. Soon all had been demolished except for two pine-kernel rolls.

'I'll save these for my Ma,' she said. 'Oh, and if you're drinking this evening, will you let me have a drop too?'

'Are you another drinker then?' said Bao-yu. 'Good! We'll have a real celebration tonight. Aroma and Skybright are both fond of drinking, but they won't take much as a rule because they feel it isn't quite proper. Tonight my birthday shall be the excuse for everyone to let themselves go I By the way, there's something I've been meaning to ask you for some time but keep forgetting. Would you make yourself responsible for Parfumee in future? Just keep an eye on her and see that she doesn't get up to mischief. Aroma would like to if she could, but she has her hands full already.'

'I can look after Parfumee, don't worry about that,' said Swallow. 'What I want to know is, what are you going to do about Fivey?'

'You can tell Mrs Liu that Fivey definitely *will* be coming to work here. After I've had a word with the others, she *can* move in as soon as she likes.'

'Now you're talking!' said Swallow. She called the two little maids in to wait on him while he washed his hands and pour out tea for him while she herself got the dirty things together and handed them to the woman outside. After that she washed her own hands and went off to tell Cook Liu the good news. But that is no part of our story.

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Bao-yu left to rejoin the others as soon as he was ready, and Parfumee, holding a silk handkerchief in one hand and a fan in the other, trailed along behind him. As he came out of the courtyard gate he saw Aroma and Skybright walking hand in hand towards him and asked them what they had come for.

'You!' they said. 'Dinner's been laid now and the others are waiting for you to begin.'

Bao-yu explained that he had just eaten.

Aroma laughed:

'You're like a cat: always eating except when you ought to be. You'd better come and sit with them all the same, for appearance's sake.'

Skybright poked Parfumee playfully on the forehead with her finger.

'You're getting to be quite a little man-eater, aren't you? Going back to have some food, indeed! You'd arranged to meet him -there, more like. Why didn't you tell anyone else that you were going?'

Aroma laughed.

'Oh nonsense, Skybright! Of course she didn't arrange to meet him. It was a pure accident, their being there at the same time together.'

'All right,' said Skybright, 'but what does he need us for then? Why don't we all go away and leave Parfumee to look after him on her own?'

'He may not need the rest of us,' said Aroma, 'but he certainly couldn't do without you.'

'On the contrary,' said Skybright. 'I'm the one person he could do without. I'm lazy, I'm clumsy, I'm bad-tempered -in short, I'm just no good for the job.'

'If he burns another hole in his peacock gold snow-cape, who's going to mend it for him if you aren't there?' said Aroma mischievously. 'Yes, my girl: all the excuses I used to hear from you in the past when I tried to get you to do something for me. You were no good at sewing, oh no! You didn't even know how to hold a needle! And it isn't as if it was my own sewing I've asked you about: it's only ever been his things that I've asked you to help me with. No, you wouldn't touch them. Yet I only have to be out of the house for a few days and

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there you are, sitting up all night sewing for him, even though you are half dead with the flu! What can the explanation of that be, I wonder? No, come on: I want to hear your answer.'

But Skybright only 'pshaw'-ed and went on smiling.

They had been.walking back to the summerhouse throughout these exchanges and were now re-entering it. Aunt Xue had come back again for the meal, so they reseated themselves in order of seniority with Aunt Xue at the head. Bao-yu poured a little tea onto some rice and merely pretended to share the meal with them. When they had finished eating, they sat talking over their tea or playing games.

Outside, meanwhile, Periwinkle, Caltrop, Parfumee, Etamine, Nenuphar and Cardamome, having been all over the Garden collecting flowers, sat down, with their laps full of them, in a little semicircle of lawn enclosed by high banks of flowering shrubbery and began playing 'match-my-flower'.

'I've got some Guanyin willow,' said one.

'I've got some Lohan pine,' said another.

'I've got gentleman's bamboo.'

'I've got lady's plantain.'

'I've got **green** starwort.'

‘I’ve got **red** moon-flower.’
‘I’ve got a peony from *The Peony Pavilion.’*
‘I’ve got a lute-flower from *The Story of the Lute.’*
‘I’ve got “brothers and sisters”,’ said Cardamome.
‘I’ve got “husbands and wives”,’ said Caltrop.
‘There’s no such flower,’ said Cardamome.
‘Yes there is,’ said Caltrop. ‘There are two main kinds of orchid, the spring orchid, which has only one flower on each stem, and the summer orchid, which has several; but there’s more than one kind of summer orchid. There’s the kind that you’ve got, which has the flowers growing one above the other on the stem: that’s called “brothers and sisters”; and there’s another kind like mine here, which has two flowers growing side by side at the top: that’s called a “husband and wife” orchid.’
Cardamome rose to her feet. Unable to counter with botanical arguments, she resorted to jeering instead.

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‘And I suppose it’s a “father and son” orchid if one flower’s bigger than the other and an “enemies” orchid if they’re growing back to back! It’s because your own husband’s been away so long: you can’t even look at an orchid now without thinking of him. You ought to be ashamed of yourself, dragging him into it like this!’
Caltrop laughed, though her face had turned bright **red.**
‘You horrible little creature! What rubbish you talk!’
She had begun getting up, intending to give Cardamome’s mouth a good pinch; but before she could do so, Cardamome had thrown herself upon her, forcing her backwards and pinning her to the ground, while at the same time she looked round and called to the other girls to help her.
‘Eamine! Nenuphar! Come and pinch her mouth for me!’
Caltrop struggled to get free and the two of them rolled over and over on the ground. The others laughed and clapped their hands.
‘Careful! Mind the puddle!’ they shouted. ‘Mind she doesn’t spoil her skirt!’
Cardamome looked round and saw that they had rolled towards a hollow in which rain-water had collected and that Caltrop’s skirt was half in it. Feeling somewhat scared, she let go of Caltrop, jumped up, and ran away. The others thought Caltrop’s plight a great joke, but fearing that, with Cardamome gone, she might vent her anger upon them, they ran off also, amidst peals of laughter.
Caltrop got up and inspected her skirt. It was completely soaked, and the foul, stagnant water was dripping off it in half-a-dozen places. She was still exclaiming bitterly over it when Bao-yu appeared. Observing that the girls were playing match-my-flower, he had gone off to collect some flowers himself and had now come back to join them. Surprised to find the other girls all gone and Caltrop standing on her own there contemplating her skirt, he asked her what had happened to the game.
‘I had a “husbands and wives” flower,’ said Caltrop, ‘but the others had never heard of it and said I’d made it up; so there was a quarrel and they spoilt my nice new skirt.’
Bao-yu seemed pleased.

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‘I can match your “husbands and wives”,’ he said, taking a **purple** skullcap from his bunch. ‘Look, here’s a “two heads are better than one”.’ He picked up Caltrop’s orchid and laid it beside the **purple** skullcap.
‘Bother your “ two heads are better than one”!’ said Caltrop, ‘and bother my “husbands and wives”! Look at my skirt!’
Bao-yu bent down and examined it.
‘Aiya! How did you manage to do that? It’s grenadine, isn’t it, that **red** material? They call it that because it’s the **red** of pomegranate-flowers. I’m afraid it’s a material that stains very badly. What a pity!’
‘It was material that Miss Bao-qin brought with her from Nanking,’ said Caltrop. ‘Miss Bao-chai and I each made ourselves a skirt out of it. This is the first time I’ve put mine on.’
Bao-yu stamped and sighed sympathetically.
‘I’m sure the Xues could afford to spoil a hundred skirts like this one every day,’ he said; ‘but that’s not the point. In the first place, if this is material that Bao-qin gave you, it’s going to look rather bad if your skirt’s worn out before Baochai’s has even been worn. And in the second place, Aunt Xue is a bit inclined to nag - I’ve often heard her complaining that you are extravagant and a bad manager and don’t know how to look after things properly and so forth - and though this may not be your fault, I’m afraid if she gets to see it, you are going to have rather a lot of that sort of thing to listen to.’

What Bao-yu had just said so exactly accorded with what Caltrop herself had been thinking, that she began, in spite of everything, to feel almost pleased.

'I know. If only I'd got another skirt like this one, I could change into it straight away and she wouldn't notice. But the trouble is, though I've got several new skirts, they all look quite different.'

'Stop moving!' said Bao-yu. 'If you don't keep still, you'll get the dirty water on your trousers and pantaloons and the tops of your shoes. I've got an idea. Last month Aroma made herself a skirt which is practically identical with this one, but she won't be able to wear it for a while yet because she's

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still in mourning for her mother. Why don't we get her to send it over for you to change into?'

Caltrop smiled gratefully but shook her head.

'No, I can't do that. I'm sure they wouldn't like it if they found out.'

'They won't mind,' said Bao-yu. 'As soon as her mourning's over you can ask her what she'd like to have in return and I'm sure they'd be only too pleased to let you give it to her. Come now, it's not like you to be so coy! It's not as if you'll be doing anything deceitful. You can tell Bao-chai about it. All we shall be doing is making sure that my aunt doesn't get to hear of it, because we know it would only make her angry'

Caltrop thought for a bit. What he said seemed reasonable. She smiled and nodded.

'All right - since you are so kind. I'll wait for you here, then. Only please, I beg of you, ask her to bring it here herself.'

Bao-yu agreed, delighted that she had accepted, and hurried back to find Aroma, head low and eyes to the ground, thinking about Caltrop all the way.

'What a pity - nice girl like that - hasn't any parents -doesn't even remember her own name - kidnapped when she was a child - and to be sold to a brute like Pan!'

But not all his thoughts about her were so melancholy.

'What a delightful surprise, though, to be able to do this for her! - That time with Patience was a surprise, too. But this! - never, never would have expected it!'

Still engrossed in these thoughts, he regained his room. There, going up to Aroma, he took her impulsively by the hand and told her what he had come for.

Everyone loved Caltrop. There was something endearing about her that one could not help responding to. Aroma was no exception and was in any case somewhat given to acts of impulsive generosity. As soon as Bao-yu told her what had happened, she opened her clothes-chest, and getting the **scarlet** skirt out, folded it up carefully and hurried off after him to look for her.

They found her still standing patiently on the spot where Bao-yu had left her. Aroma pretended to scold.

'You're too wild, Caltrop. It always ends in trouble.'

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Caltrop coloured.

'Oh, thank you, Aroma. It's those horrible little beasts I was playing with. I didn't realize they could be so nasty.'

She unfolded the skirt that Aroma had brought her. It was, as Bao-yu had said, exactly like the one she was wearing. She made him turn his back and look away while she crossed her arms and inserted her hands under her dress in order to undo the fastenings of the dirty skirt. Having carefully removed it, she wrapped herself in the clean one and did up the sides.

'Let me take that dirty one,' said Aroma. 'I'll send it back to you later when I've cleaned it up a bit. If they were to see you going back with it, they'd be sure to ask questions.'

'Yes, you take it,' said Caltrop. 'But my dear Aroma, I don't want it back if I've got this one of yours to wear. Give it to one of the younger maids. I don't mind which one: you can decide that for me.'

'That's very generous of you,' said Aroma.

Caltrop bowed twice to her in formal expression of her thanks. Aroma then went off, carrying the dirty skirt.

Looking round for Bao-yu, Caltrop found him still with his back towards her, squatting down on the ground and just completing the burial of the 'husband and wife' orchid and the **purple** skullcap. He had dug a little grave for them with a piece of stick, lined it with fallen petals, laid the two flowers on the petals, covered them with more petals, and was now smoothing earth over the top. Caltrop tugged at his arm, laughing.

'What on earth do you think you're doing? I've heard people talking about the creepy sort of things you get up to, but I only now realize what they mean. Look at your hands! They're absolutely filthy. You'd better go and wash them straight away.'

Bao-yu got up and began to go. Caltrop started walking off, too, in the opposite direction. She had gone no more than a few steps, however, when she turned and called to him to stop. Bao-yu, supposing that she had something more to say to him, turned smilingly towards her, holding up his muddy bands.

'What is it?'

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But Caltrop merely stood there, smiling and saying nothing. Just then her little maid Advent came up to tell her that Bao-qin wanted to talk to her. After that, finally, she spoke.
'You won't ever tell your Cousin Pan about this, will you?'
'What, put my head inside the mouth of a tiger?' said Baoyu, laughing. 'You must think I'm crazy!'
He turned once more and went back to **Green** Delights.

What happened there will be related in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 63

Flower maidens combine for
nocturnal birthday revels
And a grass widow copes with funeral arrangements
single-handed

The first thing Bao-yu did when he got back to **Green** Delights was to wash his hands. While doing so, he discussed with Aroma the drinking-party that they were planning to have that evening.
'I want everyone to enjoy themselves,' he said. 'I want you to let yourselves go for once. Let's decide now what we are going to eat, so that they have plenty of time to get it ready.'
'You don't have to worry about that,' said Aroma, smiling. 'I've already made a collection for tonight and given the money to Mrs Liu: ten pennyweights of silver each from Skybright, Musk, Ripple and me - that's two taels - and six each from Parfumee, Emerald, Swallow and Number Four (I didn't collect anything from the ones who are taking the evening off) making three taels four pennyweights altogether. With that money she's going to do us forty little dishes of different things to eat. I've also had a word with Patience about the drink and she's had a two-gallon jar of Shaoxing wine carried over for us. It's hidden away over there, ready for the evening. The party will be our birthday present to you from the eight of us.'
'How did the younger ones manage to give so much?' said Bao-yu, pleased but a little concerned. 'I think it would have been better if you hadn't taken contributions from them.'
'What about *us* then?' said Skybright. 'We're not exactly rich. This is something they wanted to do for you. I think you ought to accept it in the spirit in which it was offered and not bother too much about where the money came from. Suppose they stole it: what does that matter to you?'

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'You're right,' said Bao-yu, laughing.
'If you were to go for one single day without feeling the rough side of her tongue,' said Aroma, 'I think you would feel deprived!'
'Aroma is getting quite expert in the art of stirring up trouble between other people,' said Skybright. 'I wonder who she picked it up from.'
While the others were still laughing at these exchanges, Bao-yu gave orders for them to close the courtyard gate.
'I don't wonder the young ladies call you "Busybody",' said Aroma. 'If we shut the gate now, we shall be simply inviting suspicion. Much better wait a bit.'
Bao-yu nodded.
'I have to go outside now for a moment. Have some water ready when I get back, will you, Number Four? Swallow, you can come with me.'
When they were outside and he had first made sure that no one else was about, he asked Swallow what Cook Liu had said about Fivey.
'Mrs Liu was very pleased when I told her,' said Swallow, 'but she said that because of all the worry and the harsh treatment she suffered the other night Fivey has had a relapse; so it's out of the question for her to begin working with us now. She said it will just have to wait until she's better.'
Judging from the long sigh he gave when he heard this, Bao-yu appeared to be very much distressed.
'Tell me,' he asked, 'does Aroma know about this?'
'I haven't told her myself,' said Swallow. 'I suppose Parfumee might have done.'
'Anyway, *I* haven't told her yet,' he said. 'Hmn. Perhaps I'd better.'
Going back inside, he was careful to wash his hands to avert suspicion.
It was already lighting-up time. A party of women could be heard entering the courtyard gate. The inmates of **Green** Delights crowded to the windows to peep out. It was Lin Zhi-xiao's wife, accompanied by a number of the stewardesses. A woman holding a big lantern in her hand was leading the way.

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‘They’ve come to inspect the watch,’ said Skybright. ‘When they go out again we shall be able to shut the gate.’
Sure enough, the women on night-duty at **Green** Delights now trooped out into the courtyard to be inspected.
‘Now, no gambling and no drinking!’ said Lin Zhi-xiao’s wife, when she had ascertained that they were all there. ‘And no lying down and going to sleep until daylight, or I shall be after you!’
‘None of us is that stupid,’ said the women, laughing. ‘We wouldn’t dare.’
‘Is Master Bao in bed yet?’ Lin Zhi-xiao’s wife asked them. The women said they didn’t know. Aroma gave Bao-yu a prod and he shuffled to the doorway in his slippers and smiled amiably at the assembled matrons outside.
‘I haven’t gone to bed yet. Come inside and sit down.’ He turned to Aroma inside. ‘Aroma, some tea for Mrs Lin!’
Lin Zhi-xiao’s wife required no pressing.
‘Not in bed yet?’ she exclaimed, stepping nimbly into the room. ‘Now that the days are so long, you need to go to bed early so that you can get up early in the morning. If you get up late, people will laugh at you. “That’s no way for an educated, well-brought-up young gentleman to behave,” they’ll say. “More like an ignorant, uneducated coolie.”‘
The comparison seemed to please her, for she laughed very complacently after making it. Bao-yu laughed too.
‘You’re quite right, Mrs Lin. As a matter of fact, I do go to bed early most nights. Generally when you make your rounds I don’t know you’ve been here because I’m already in bed when you come. The reason I’ve stayed up today is because I’ve had such a lot of noodles to eat. I was afraid that if I went to bed now I’d get indigestion.’
Lin Zhi-xiao’s wife transferred her smiling attention to Aroma.
‘You want to give him some good, strong Pu-er tea to drink.’
Aroma and Skybright answered her together.
‘We made him a big pot of herbal tea - *wutong-tips*. He’s already had two cupfuls of it. It’s still quite fresh. Would you like to try some?’

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Lin Zhi-xiao’s wife rose to receive the cup that Skybright poured for her.
‘I hear that Master Bao has taken to calling you senior girls by your names,’ she said. ‘Now that’s not very respectful. Though you work here, you are still Their Ladyships’ girls, don’t forget. I don’t say but what he mightn’t sometimes, just once in a while, let one of your names drop out by accident, and no harm done. But if he makes a habit of it, the other young gentlemen will soon be copying him, and we shall get ourselves laughed at as a family in which the young folk have no respect for their elders.’
‘You are quite right,’ said Bao-yu. ‘But in fact it *is* only once in a while and quite unintentionally.’
Aroma and Skybright hastened to corroborate this.
‘Oh yes, Mrs Lin. It would be quite unfair to say that he makes a habit of it. Normally he is most respectful. It’s only once or twice in this apartment when we’ve been joking together and never in front of other people.’
Lin Zhi-xiao’s wife was all smiles.
‘Well, that’s all right then. Respectable is what an educated young gentleman ought to be. The more you respect others, I say, the more others will respect you. And I don’t only mean older people who have served three or four generations of the family, I mean anyone who comes to you from Their Lady-ships. Even Their Ladyships’ cat and Their Ladyships’ dog is to be respected, if you want people to think of you as an educated, well-brought-up young gentleman.’
She finished her tea.
‘Well, good night young master, I must be going.’
‘Won’t you stay a little longer?’ said Bao-yu.
But Lin Zhi-xiao’s wife was already on her way and leading her troops off to inspect another apartment. Skybright barred the gate after her as soon as she was gone. She was laughing as she came in afterwards.
‘I think the old girl’s had a bit too much to drink. That’s why we were treated to the lecture.’
‘She means well,’ said Musk. ‘We need someone to remind us once in a while, just to keep us on the straight and narrow.’
She began laying the table while she said this; but Aroma stopped her.

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‘Let’s not sit up at the big table. We can put the round pear-wood table on the kang. It will be much more relaxed and comfortable on the kang.’
While other maids lifted the pear-wood table onto the kang, Musk and Number Four went off to collect the dishes that Cook Liu had been preparing for them. Though each carried the largest tea-tray she could find, it took four or five trips to carry them all over. Meanwhile two old nannies squatted on the verandah outside, tending the stove on which the wine was heating.
‘It’s so hot,’ Bao-yu said to the maids. ‘Let’s take our outer clothes off.’
‘You can take yours off if you like,’ said the girls, ‘but *we* want to drink a health with you before we start, so we shall have to stay respectable a bit longer.’
‘If you’re going to begin that sort of nonsense, we shan’t get started until morning!’ said Bao-yu. ‘You know how I hate that kind of thing. It’s bad enough at parties outside when I have to do it; but to make me do it here in my

own room it's as though you were deliberately trying to annoy me.'
'All right, all right!' they said. 'Anything you say!'
And so, before taking their places on the kang, they went off to remove their hair-ornaments and make themselves more comfortable. They returned wearing only tunics and trousers, with their unadorned hair loosely knotted or coiled. Bao-yu himself was wearing a dark-red cotton tunic tied at the waist with a sash, and trousers in a black-and-**green**-patterned lined silk gauze, unconfined at the ankles. The girls found him already ensconced on the kang. He was leaning back, one elbow resting on a newly-made turquoise-coloured pouffe stuffed with rose and peony petals, playing guess-fingers with Parfumee. Parfumee was shouting excitedly as she played. She was wearing a very short, close-fitting tunic with a harlequin pattern of turquoise, deep **purple** and reddish-brown lozenges, a willow-**green** sash, and flower-sprigged pale **red** trousers, which, like Bao-yu's, were unconfined at the ankles. Her hair was done up in a number of little plaits which had been drawn back to join one great plait, as thick as a goose's egg at the nape of her neck. She had a tiny jade stud no bigger than a grain of rice in her right ear; from her left ear hung a pendant

made of ruby-glass and gold, the size of a ginkgo-fruit. Never had the moonlike pallor of her face, the limpid brightness of her eyes shown to greater advantage.
'Look at that now!' said the maids admiringly. 'Wouldn't you take the two of them for a pair of twins?'
'Wait a bit,' said Aroma, who had begun pouring wine. 'You can play that later. Even though you won't let us drink healths with you, at least do us the honour of drinking from our hands.'
She held her wine-cup to his lips and he took a sip from it. After that each of the seven others came up to him in turn, holding their full cups out to him, and he took a sip from each one. This little ceremony over, they proceeded to arrange themselves round the table. As there was insufficient room for Swallow and Number Four on the side nearest the edge of the kang, they brought a couple of felt-covered porcelain 'tabouret' stools up and sat at it on the floor below. The forty dishes, all of white Ding-ware and each no larger than a tea-saucer, contained every conceivable kind of sweet, savoury, fresh, dried, pickled, salted, smoked, baked, fried or sauteed delicacy designed to assist file absorption of rice-wine by the human frame.
'Let's play a drinking game,' said Bao-yu.
'Yes, but let it be a nice, quiet game this time,' said Aroma. 'We don't want too much shouting, or people will hear us. Something not too learned, though. Don't forget that some of us. here can't read or write.'
'Get out the dice and let's play Fours then,' said Musk.
'No, that's a boring game,' said Bao-yu. 'Let's play Choosing the Flower.'
'Oh yes, do let's!' said Skybright. 'I've been wanting to play that for ages.'
'It's a good game,' said Aroma, 'but you really need more people playing it to make it interesting.'
'If you ask me, I think we should slip over and ask Miss Bao and Miss Yun and Miss Lin to come and join us,' said Swallow. 'There'd be no harm in their staying here till about ten o'clock, surely?'
'But think of all the opening and closing of gates,' said

Aroma. And suppose you ran into the watch and they started asking -'
'It'll be all right,' said Bao-yu. 'Ask Miss Tan too; she's fond of drinking. And if she's one of the party, they won't be able to say anything even if they do find out. And what about Miss Qin?'
'No, not Miss Qin,' said the girls. 'She's staying in Mrs Zhu's room. Routing her out from there would be simply asking for trouble.'
'It'll be all right,' said Bao-yu, 'you see. Just ask her.'
Swallow and Number Four needed no second bidding. Choosing a few of the junior maids to go with them, they ordered the old women to open the gate for them and set off, one in the direction of Dai-yu's place and one in the direction of Bao-chai's.
The senior maids, Aroma, Musk and Skybright, doubted whether, particularly in the case of Dai-yu and Bao-chai, such insubstantial deputies would be successful and decided that they had better go themselves and add their own weight to the invitation. Ordering a couple of the older women with lanterns to accompany them, they went off in. the wake of the other two to see what they could achieve.
It was as they had suspected. Bao-chai 'thought it was rather late'; Dai-yu 'didn't feel quite up to it'. It was only when Aroma and Skybright had appealed to them by pointing out that the maids were the hosts and would very much appreciate the honour that they changed their minds and finally consented to come.
Swallow and Number Four had had no such difficulty with Tan-chun. She had seemed delighted by the invitation, even suggesting that they should invite Li Wan as well since it would be embarrassing if she were not invited and were to find out about the party afterwards - and sending her own maid. Ebony to help Swallow persuade Li Wan that she and Bao-qin should come.
One by one the new guests started to arrive. Caltrop came, too, in addition to the ones already mentioned. Refusing to take 'no' for an answer, Aroma had taken her firmly by the hand and dragged her off forcibly from All-spice Court. To

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accommodate the greater numbers, Aroma and the other girls put another table alongside the one already on the kang and a row of chairs facing them on the floor below. Bao-yu and the other guests arranged themselves on the kang, while the seven maids and Parfumee, as hosts, sat on the row of chairs below, within reach of one or other of the tables.

'Cousin Lin can sit there, against the partition,' said Bao-yu, while the guests were still arranging themselves on the kang. 'She'll be better able to keep warm there.'

He made her a little nest of pillows there, into which, though it was somewhat inconveniently distant from the table, she settled herself very comfortably. From this cosy vantage-point she looked across at Li Wan, Bao-chai and Tan-chun with a teasing smile.

'You are always grumbling about the gambling and drinking of the servants, yet here are we proposing to do precisely the same thing ourselves. How will you have the face to tell them off for this sort of thing in future?'

'This doesn't count,' said Li Wan, smiling back at her. 'There's all the difference in the world between doing this once in a while on a birthday or a holiday and doing it every night of one's life.'

Skybright now produced a cylindrical bamboo box containing a set of ivory drinking-cards, each with a different kind of flower painted on it. After giving it a good shake, she put it down in the middle of one of the tables. Then she took four dice, put them inside a dice-box, shook it, opened it, and looked inside. The pips on the faces uppermost made a total of five. Counting herself as 'one', the fifth along in an anti-clockwise direction was Bao-chai.

'I draw first then,' said Bao-chai, smiling. 'I wonder what it will be.'

She gave the cylinder another shake and pulled out a card. The others craned over to look. It had a picture of a peony on it with the caption 'Empress of the Garden' in large **red** characters. This was followed by a line of smaller black characters from a poem by the Tang poet Luo Yin:

Yourself lack passion, yet can others move.

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On the other side of the picture were directions for the person drawing the card and for the other drinkers:

All present are to drink a cup in your honour. Also,
because you have preeminence over all the other flowers,
you are entitled to ask anyone present to recite a poem
or tell a joke or sing a song for your entertainment.

The others laughed delightedly.

'The peony suits you perfectly. What a splendid choice!'

When they had all drunk the cupful, Bao-chai drank a little wine herself and said that she would like Parfumee to sing her a song. Parfumee began:

'The sumptuous birthday feast begins -'

'Stop! Stop!' said the others. 'We don't want birthday odes at this time of night. Sing us something nice.'

Parfumee began again, this time putting all she had into the performance:

'With my little phoenix-feather broom
I stand at heaven's door
To sweep away the fallen flowers
That lie on heaven's floor;
And when, by yonder cloud-bank,
The wind begins to rise,
It stirs the pearly dust up:
Round and round it flies.
O, sweeping heaven's floor
Is like any earthly chore! ...'

Meanwhile Bao-yu, who had taken temporary possession of the card, continued to turn it this way and that between his fingers, muttering to himself the line of verse that was inscribed on it:

Yourself lack passion, yet can others move.

When Parfumee had finished, he gazed at her fixedly, saying nothing. Xiang-yun snatched the card from him rather impatiently and handed it back to Bao-chai. Bao-chai threw the dice. Sixteen. This time the count went right round both tables, ending at Tan-chun, who was sitting next to her.
'I wonder what I shall be,' said Tan-chun, and reached out

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to draw a card. But she blushed when she had looked at it and threw it on the table with an embarrassed laugh.
'I don't think we ought to play this game,' she said. 'It's really a game for men to play, outside. There are all sorts of objectionable things in the directions.'
The others were puzzled, until Aroma picked the card up and held it out for them to see. The picture was of a spray of almond blossom with the caption 'Spirit of the Afterglow'. The line of verse which followed it was by Gao Chan

Apricot-trees make the sun's red-petalled floor.

Then came the part which had made Tan-chun feel embarrassed:

You are destined to make a noble marriage. Congratulations! Those present must offer you a cup of wine and drink a cup in your honour.

The reading of these words was greeted with general laughter.
'So that's what upset you? Well, it's true there are a few like this which are amusing at the expense of us girls, but there's no real harm in them. Anyway, what's wrong with the prognostication? We've already got one royal consort in the family, why shouldn't we have another? Congratulations!'
They raised their cups and drank a toast to the marriage. Tan-chun herself refused to drink, but Xiang-yun, Caltrop and Li Wan seized hold of her and forced the wine down her throat. Even then she continued to insist that they ought to abandon the game and play something else. Xiang-yun had to take hold of her hand, clamp her fingers to the dice-box, and force her to throw the dice. The number thrown in this way was nineteen. This time the count was more than the number of players and ended, the second time round, at Li Wan. Li Wan shook the cylinder and drew out a card. She smiled when she saw what she had got.
'Very good! Look at this, all of you! This is rather a nice one.'
The picture was of a winter-flowering plum with the rubric 'Beauty of the Snow'. The verse that followed was by Wang Qi:

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Content by cottage fence to bloom unseen. The instructions given on this card were:

You are to drink a cup of wine. The next player after you is to throw the dice.

'There, isn't that nice!' said Li Wan. '*You* have to throw the dice for me and *I* just sit back enjoying myself and let the world go by!'
She sipped her wine and passed the dice-box to Dai-yu. The eighteen which Dai-yu threw brought the count round to Xiang-yun.
'Ha ha!' said Xiang-yun, rolling up her sleeves. She stretched her arm out and drew a card. The others looked at what she had drawn. It was a picture of crab-apple blossom with the caption 'Sweet Drunken Dreamer'. The quotation following was a line from Su Dong-po:

Fear that the flowers at dead of night should sleep.

'For "at dead of night" read "on a stone bench",' said Dai-yu.
The others laughed, remembering Xiang-yun's inebriation earlier in the day; but Xiang-yun smiled unconcernedly and pointed to the self-propelling toy boat on Bao-yu's shelf.
'Just get on that boat and go home, will you? You have too much to say for yourself, my girl!'
Amidst further laughter they looked at the instructions:

In view of the sweet drunken dreaming you are not to drink anything yourself, but the players sitting to right and left of you are each to drink a cupful.

'Holy Name!' said Xiang-yun, clapping her hands delightedly. 'What a kind, *thoughtful* card!'
Xiang-yun's neighbours, it so happened, were Dai-yu and Bao-yu. Others filled their cups for them in readiness. Bao-yu drank half of his and gave the rest to Parfumee, who threw her head back and

emptied it at a gulp; Dai-yu, under cover of talking to someone, emptied the whole of hers into a spittoon. Xiang-yun picked up the dice. The total this time was nine, which meant that Musk was to draw. The card she

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drew portrayed a rose under the caption ‘Summer’s Crowning Glory’. The black-letter verse was another line from Wang Qi:

After sweet Rose there is no more blooming.

And the instructions:

All present drink three cups to commemorate the passing of the flowers.

‘What does it say?’ Musk asked.

Bao-yu frowned and quickly hid the card. ‘We are all to drink something,’ he said.

As a compromise they drank three sips each instead of the three cupfuls prescribed.

Musk threw nineteen with the dice, which made it Caltrop’s turn to draw. The flower she drew was a **purple** skullcap with the caption ‘Three Springs’ Harbinger’. The line of verse was by Zhu Shu-zhen:

Even as the twy-stemmed blossoms break in bloom.

And the comment:

This flower is a luck-bringer. Congratulations! Those present are to offer you three cups of wine and are each to drink a cup of wine to your health.

Caltrop threw six. Dai-yu to draw.

‘I wonder if there are any nice ones left,’ Dai-yu thought as she reached out to draw a card. ‘I hope I shall pick one of them if there are.’

She looked at the card she had taken. It was a hibiscus flower. ‘Mourner of the Autumn Mere’ the caption said, and the line of verse was by Ou-yang Xiu:

Your own self, not the East Wind, is your undoing.

The instructions said:

You are to drink a cup of wine yourself, and Peony is to take a cup with you.

The others laughed.

‘Isn’t that good! It’s exactly the right flower for her.’

Dai-yu too seemed pleased. When she and Bao-chai had

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drunk, she threw the dice. Twenty. That meant that Aroma was to draw. Aroma reached out and took a card. The picture on it was of a spray of peach-blossom with the caption ‘Fisherman’s Lost Paradise’ and the verse, from Xie Fang-de:

peach-trees in **pink** and another spring is here.

The instructions said:

Almond is to drink a cup of wine with you, so is anyone who is the same age as you, anyone whose birthday is on the same day, and anyone who has the same surname.

‘This one sounds interestion,’said the others, laughing, and at once began working out which of them belonged to these categories. Caltrop, Skybright and Bao-chai were all the same age as Aroma; Dai-yu’s birthday was on the same day’ but there appeared to be no one present with the same surname – until Parfumee pointed out that her surname, like Aroma’s, was ‘Hua’ and claimed the right to drink a cup as well.

While the others were pouring out the wine, Dai-yu looked mischievously at Tan-chun:

‘As both Almond and someone who is destined to marry royalty, *you* had better begin.’

‘What’s that?’ said Tan-chun. She turned to Li Wan. ‘Oblige me by leaning over and giving that girl a back-hander, would you?’

‘Oh, that seems rather hard!’ said Li Wan. ‘She’s not getting a royal husband and now she is to be beaten as

well!'

Aroma was about to throw the dice when they heard someone calling outside the gate. One of the old women hurried out to see who it was and came back to tell them that it was some people from Aunt Xue's come to collect Dai-yu.

'What time is it?' they asked the old woman.

'Long past second watch,' she said. 'It struck eleven some time ago.'

Bao-yu, refusing to believe that it could be so late, asked to see his watch. He found on inspecting it, however, that it was in fact five and twenty minutes past eleven. Dai-yu rose to her feet.

'I can't, in any case, keep going much longer,' she said. 'And I have to take my medicine when I get back.'

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'Perhaps we'd all better break off now,' said the others.

Aroma and Bao-yu tried to dissuade them, but Li Wan and Tan-chun were insistent.

'It's terribly late. We've already broken enough rules for one day.'

'Very well,' said Aroma. 'All of you lust drink one mote cup of wine then, and we'll let you go.'

Skybright, assisted by one of the junior maids, was already filling their cups. The others drank up and called for their lanterns to be lit. When they were ready, Aroma and the rest of the maids accompanied them all the way to the far side of Drenched Blossoms Bridge before returning to **Green** Delights. There, having once more barred the gate, they continued for a while with the game. Aroma filled some extra large cups with wine and put a selection of the delicacies on the little dishes on to a large plate to give to the old women who had been all this time on duty. Everyone was by now beginning to be a little drunk. Soon they were playing guess-fingers and singing solos. By two o'clock the old women, who had been supplementing what the maids, in their kindness, had given them by surreptitiously helping themselves, had made such formidable inroads into the wine-supply that the two-gallon jar was suddenly found to be empty. On hearing that there was no more wine, the maids began to clear the things away and to wash and prepare themselves for bed.

Parfumee, who had drunk so much that her cheeks were flushed and her eyes glittered with an unnatural brightness, was incapable of moving. She leaned inertly against Aroma's shoulder, murmuring plaintively in her ear.

'Oh, Aroma! My heart is beating so!' Aroma laughed.

'You shouldn't have drunk so much!'

Swallow and Number Four had long since succumbed and were lying asleep on the kang. Skybright tried unsuccessfully to wake them; but Bao-yu stopped her:

'Leave them alone. It doesn't matter if we all sleep here for once.'

He followed their example by pillowing his head on the

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petal-stuffed damask cushion, turning over on his side, and promptly dropping off to sleep.

Aroma could see that Parfumee was extremely drunk. Fearing that any but the slightest movement might make her sick, she lifted her up, very, very gently, and laid her down beside Bao-yu on the kang. She herself lay down on the couch opposite. A gentle oblivion then descended upon all of them and they slept like tops until morning.

It was already broad daylight when Aroma opened her eyes.

'Oh, it's late!' she said.

She raised her head up to look at the kang opposite. Parfumee was still fast asleep, her head resting on the raised edge of the kang. Aroma hurriedly got up and went across to wake her. Her calling aroused Bao-yu, who sat up, looked around him cheerfully, commented 'It's late!', and gave Parfumee a prod. Then Parfumee, too, sat up, rubbing her eyes and still only half awake.

'Shame on you!' said Aroma, laughing at her. 'Look where you spent last night! You must have been *very* drunk, not to have chosen your place more carefully!'

Parfumee looked around her and saw that she had spent the night at Bao-yu's side. She slipped off the kang hurriedly, with an embarrassed laugh.

'How did I …?'

'I don't know either,' said Bao-yu, laughing. 'If I had known, I should have rubbed some ink on your face!'

Maids now came in carrying the basin and other things for his toilet.

'Thank you all very much for last night's party,' said Bao-yu. 'We'll have another one tonight and this time you shall all be *my* guests.'

'Oh, no!' said Aroma. 'Not again! If we make another rumpus tonight, people will start complaining.'

‘That’s all right,’ said Bao-yu. ‘It’s only twice. Anyway, we’re all seasoned drinkers. Just think, we got through a whole two-gallon jar of wine last night! Just as it was beginning to get interesting, we found that we’d run out.’

‘That’s how it should be,’ said Aroma. ‘It’s much better to

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end a party when the fun is at its height than to go on until everyone is exhausted. I must say, everyone was in very good form last night. Skybright was being quite abandoned. She even sang a song, if I remember rightly!’
‘But don’t you remember?’ said Number Four. ‘*You* sang one too. We *all* did.’
A fit of uncontrollable giggles possessed the maids as they remembered, and they hid their blushing faces in their hands. While they were still giggling, a smiling Patience arrived. She had come to invite her hosts of the previous day to a return party.
‘No excuses!’ she said. ‘I shall expect every one of you t6 be there.’
They made her sit down and somebody fetched her some tea.
‘What a pity we didn’t have *her* with us last night!’ Skybright commented.
Patience pricked up her ears.
‘Why, what were you doing last night?’
‘I don’t know whether I ought to tell you,’ said Aroma. ‘We had a high old time, I can tell you that. Even the high jinks Her Old Ladyship gets up to with the young ladies and Master Bao are nothing compared to last night. We got through a whole two-gallon jar of wine. We drank so much that we forgot our shame, singing songs until after two o’clock, then lying around with our clothes on and sleeping where we lay until morning.’
‘Charming!’ said Patience with pretended indignation. ‘You come and ask me for wine, you *don’t* invite me to your party, and now you have the nerve to tell me what a wonderful time you had. I feel really angry!’
‘He’s giving a return party tonight,’ said Skybright. ‘He’s sure to ask you to that. I expect he’ll be going over himself shortly to invite you.’

‘“He” is who? Who is “he”?’ said Patience.

‘Oh, sharp-ears!’ Skybright coloured and pretended to strike her. ‘Trust you to pick on a little thing like that!’

‘Well, I can’t stay here talking, I’ve got something to attend to,’ said Patience. ‘I’ll be sending someone over later

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to tell you when it’s ready. Mind you all come now, or I’ll have the troops out to come and get you!’
Bao-yu and the maids tried to detain her, but she was already on her way.

Bao-yu now completed his interrupted toilet and took his early morning tea. While he sat sipping it, his eye chanced to light on a sheet of paper underneath the inkstone.

‘I wish you girls wouldn’t use my inkstone as a paperweight,’ he said.
Aroma and Skybright were immediately on the defensive.
‘Oh dear! Who’s at fault this time?’
Bao-yu pointed towards the offending paper.
‘Look. Under the inkstone. Someone’s pattern, I expect, that she forgot to put away.’
Skybright lifted the inkstone and picked up the paper from underneath. It was not an embroidery-pattern but some kind of writing. She handed it to Bao-yu. It was a sheet of **pink**, patterned letter-paper. A single column of characters ran down the centre of it:

From Adamantina, the Dweller Beyond the Threshold: Respectful Anniversary Greetings.

‘Who took delivery of this note?’ he asked, jumping up excitedly.
Assuming, from the degree of agitation, that the note must be from a person of some consequence, Aroma and Skybright took up the question. In response to their shouted inquiry, a smiling Number Four came running into the room.
‘I did. From Adamantina. She didn’t bring it herself, she sent one of the old women with it. I put it down somewhere in here. I meant to tell you about it, but with all that drinking last night I forgot.’
‘So that’s who it’s from,’ said the other maids. ‘What a fuss about nothing!’
But Bao-yu evidently did not think so.
‘Fetch me some paper,’ he said, still in some agitation, and himself began grinding the ink. But when the ink was ground and he sat with moistened brush poised in readiness over the virgin paper, he found that he did not know how to begin.

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What was the correct response to ‘Dweller Beyond the Threshold’? For a long time he sat thinking, but no inspiration was forthcoming.

‘It’s no good asking Bao-chai,’ he thought. ‘She’d only say something critical about Adamantina being too “fanciful”. I’d better ask Dai-yu.’

Slipping Adamantina’s note into his sleeve, he set off in the direction of the Naiad’s House. He was lust stepping off the Drenched Blossoms bridge when he caught sight of Xing Xiu-yan bustling along in a very purposeful manner from the opposite direction.

‘Where are you going?’ he asked her.

‘I want to have a talk with Adamantina.’

Bao-yu was surprised.

‘Adamantina is such a strange, contrary person. There are very few people she can get on with. If she thinks highly of you, it proves that you must be made of finer stuff than the rest of us.’

‘I don’t know whether she thinks particularly *highly* of me,’ said Xiu-yan, ‘but we were neighbours for ten years. When she was serving her novitiate at the Coiled Incense Temple, there was only a party wall separating her from the place where my family lived. My family was too poor to own a house and for ten years lived in rented accommodation in her temple. Whenever I had nothing else to do, I used to go inside the nuns’ courtyard and spend my time with Adamantina. It was she who taught me to read and write. In fact, everything I know, practically, I owe to her. So you see, she’s not only my “hard times friend”; she is also in a sense my teacher. When my parents finally came here to throw themselves on the generosity of your family, we learned that Adamantina, too, had found a home here. She had evidently found this a place where her eccentricities would be tolerated and where she would be safe from molestation by those having the power to persecute her. It seemed as if our destinies must be linked. And I was glad to find, when I went to look her up here, that her friendship for me was unaltered. In fact, I think that if anything she is even nicer to me now than she was before.’

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As if by a flash of lightning, the mystery of Xiu-yan’s utter alienness from her appalling parents was revealed.

‘I *see!’* he said. ‘That ethereal, crane-in-the-clouds quality one notices in everything you do or say I see now where you get it from. As a matter of fact it’s something to do with Adamantina that has brought me out. Something she wrote has been puzzling me and I was on my way to ask someone else’s advice about it when I ran into you. It’s an extraordinary bit of luck that I did, because you are obviously much better qualified to advise me than the person I had been intending to ask.’

He took the piece of paper from his sleeve and showed it to her. Xiu-yan ran her eye over it and laughed.

‘She’ll never change. The same whimsical, preposterous Adamantina as always I Who but Adamantina would use her nom-de-plume in a birthday greeting? Talk about “a monk no monk and a maid no maid”! What sort of etiquette is that?’

‘I don’t agree,’ said Bao-yu, smiling. ‘Adamantina is above etiquette. She doesn’t subscribe to the conventions of our mundane world. Her writing to me in this way shows that she must credit me with some intelligence. Unfortunately I haven’t the faintest idea in what terms I ought to reply. I was on my way to ask Cousin Lin’s advice when I was fortunate enough to bump into you.’

For some moments Xiu-yan ran her eyes up and down Bao-yu appraisingly. Finally she broke into a laugh.

‘“The sight of it exceedeth the report thereof.” I see now what they mean. I’m not surprised she sent you this. And I’m not surprised she gave you all that plum-blossom last year. Well, if even Adamantina has succumbed, I suppose I shall have to do my little bit by explaining what this means.

‘Adamantina is fond of saying that out of all the poems by all the poets of the Han, Jin, North-and-South, Tang and Song dynasties, a couple of lines in Fan Cheng-da’s “Walk in the Cemetery” are the only decent verses ever written:

Though you hide behind a threshold of indestructible iron,
The mound shaped like a wheat-cake will claim you for its own.

That’s why she calls herself “The Dweller Beyond the

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Threshold”. Her favourite prose-writer is Zhuang-zi, so sometimes she calls herself “The Outsider”, after Zhuang-zi’s “outsider ... wandering beyond the realm”. The way to please her is to refer to yourself modestly as someone still trapped in the toils of the wicked world while she is floating freely somewhere above them. If she’d called herself “The Outsider” in this note she’s sent you, the right response would have been to call yourself “The Worldling” in your reply. As she’s called herself “The Dweller Beyond the Threshold”, you should refer to yourself in answering as “The Dweller *Behind* the Threshold”, to indicate that you have

understood the reference to Fan Cheng-da.'

The scriptures tell us that the revelation 6f the Buddha-truth comes 'like ghee poured upon the head'. Bao-yu must have had some such feeling as he listened to Xiu-yan, for he first of all gave a gasp of discovery and then laughed out loud.

'I see! *That's* why our family temple is called the "Temple of the Iron Threshold" I Thank you very much. Now I *can* go and write my reply.'

Xiu-yan continued on her way to **Green** Bower Hermitage and Bao-yu went back to write his note. He wrote:

From Bao-yu, Dweller Behind the Threshold, Devout and Humble Thanks.

He carried the note to the Hermitage himself and posted it through the crack between the double doors.

By the time he got back to **Green** Delights, Parfumee had just completed her toilet. She had gone back to the elaborate feminine coiffure which she normally favoured, complete with kingfisher-feather hair-ornaments; but Bao-yu said he would prefer to see her permanently got up like a boy. He had her fringe and side-pieces cut off and the remaining short bits shaved away from her forehead round to the back of her neck, so that only the long hair growing from the crown of her head remained.

'We'll get you a big fur cap with ear-flaps to wear in the winter,' he said, 'and big tiger-boots for your feet, or white socks and thick-soled, stitch-patterned padded shoes, to go with loose-bottomed trousers. And we'd better change your

name. "Parfumee" won't do for a boy. What about "Honey Boy"? We can call you "Honey" for short.'

Parfumee was delighted.

'Now you'll be able to take me with you when you go outside,' she said. 'If anyone asks about me, you can tell them that I'm one of your pages, like Tealeaf.'

Bao-yu smiled at the idea, but seemed rather doubtful.

'I think sooner or later they'd be able to tell that you weren't.'

'You have no imagination!' said Parfumee 'Tell them I'm a foreign page. Your family's got several foreign pages.* Anyway a pigtail suits me; everyone says it does. What about it? Don't you think it's a brilliant idea?'

Bao-yu was quite won over.

* *Stone's Note to Reader:*

> Both the Rong and Ning branches of the Jia family did in fact employ a number of foreign captives taken by previous members of the family in their various military campaigns and later graciously bestowed on them as bond-slaves by His Imperial Majesty. They were invariably employed as grooms, being useless for any other kind of work. Parfumee transvestism was by no means a novelty in the household. The tomboyish Shi Xiang-yun had long since shown a passion for dressing up in military uniform and was frequently to be seen wearing a cavalryman's belt and tight-sleeved riding habit. When Bao-yu put Parfumee into boy's clothing, she was quick to follow suit by dressing her own Althee in a page's costume. As a 'painted face' Althee was already in the habit of shaving off the short hair above her forehead and round her ears to facilitate making-up and had acquired a certain masculinity of movement and gesture from the roles she played, so the transformation was in her case a less drastic one. Li Wan and Tan-chun were so taken with the result that they decided to dress Bao-qin's Cardamome up ass little page as well. Her hair was done up in two knots like horns, one on each side of her head. Dressed in trousers and a short smock and with a pair of **red** shoes on her feet she looked - except for the make-up - exactly like the scholar' page, Lute Boy, in the play. Xiang-yun changed Althee's name to 'Valiant' because she thought it suited her. Cardamome was the youngest, liveliest and most mischievous of the little ex-actresses and the majority of the Garden's inhabitants had already taken to calling her by less flattering sobriquets long before her transformation into a page. After the transformation had been made, Bao-qin rejected 'Lute Boy' as too obvious; and since she liked 'Cardamome' and thought it a pretty name, she resolved to retain at any rate the middle part of it by calling the new page 'Damon'.
>
> Stone

'It's a very good idea. I've often seen officials with little foreign servants - mostly Tartars or Tibetans captured in

the wars. People like to have them as grooms because they are good at handling horses and don't mind waiting about in the cold. We'll have to give you a foreign name then. What about "Yelu Hunni" ? "Yelu" is an old Kitan Surname and" Hunni" is what the Xiong-nu used to call themselves.'

Parfumee was very satisfied with this, so it was agreed that in future she would always be referred to as Yelu Hunni.

After lunch Patience's messenger arrived to say that, as the summerhouse in the Peony Garden was thought to be too hot, her return party had been laid out in the Shady Elm rooms. You-shi came over well in advance, bringing two of Cousin Zhen's little concubines, Lovey and Dove, with her from Ning-guo House. They were very young and wild and had seldom been taken to the neighbouring mansion before. Today, meeting such lively members of the Garden's society as Caltrop, Xiang-yun, Parfumee and Etamine for the first time, they were in their element, quickly proving the truth of the old saying about 'birds of a feather' by chattering nineteen to the dozen with their new-found friends and dashing off with them on an exploratory tour of the Garden. You-shi was left to the company of her own maids.

Presently, when they were visiting **Green** Delights, Caltrop, Lovey and Dove were very much amused to hear Bao-yu addressing Parfumee as 'Yelu Hunni'. Having elicited from her how she came to have acquired so extraordinary a name, they began to try using it themselves; but in their unpractised mouths the foreign sounds soon degenerated into '**Yellow** Honey'; and even this was soon abandoned in favour of '**Yellow** Belly'. The maids, hearing them call her this, were all in stitches. Bao-yu feared that Parfumee would be wounded by their hilarity and proposed yet another change of name.

'There is a land in the West called "Fran-see-ya" where they make a kind of golden glitter-glass called "aventurin". You are such a bright and glittering person yourself: I think the name Aventurin would suit you very well.'

Parfumee was delighted with it. But it was still no good:

the others found 'Aventurin' too difficult; and having estab-

lished that it was the name of some kink of foreign glass, soon took to calling her 'Glassy' or 'Glass-eyes' instead.

But we digress.

The party in the Shady Elm rooms had now begun. Once more wine was made an excuse for much unrestrained hilarity. The blind ballad-singers were asked to drum for them and Patience broke off a spray of peonies to play 'passing the branch' with. There must have been near enough twenty people taking part in the game. Just as the fun was at its height, it was announced that two women had arrived delivering things from the Zhen family in Nanking and Tan-chun, Li Wan and You-shi had to go off to the jobs room to receive them. The others decided to make a little break in the party while they did so, in which those who wanted to could take some exercise outside. Lovey and Dove decided to have a swing.

'You get up as well,' Bao-yu said to Lovey, who was pushing. 'I'll push you both.'

'Oh no you don't!' said Lovey. 'I know your kind of pushing! **Yellow**-belly can push us.'

'*Please*,' said Bao-yu exasperatedly, '*don't* call her by that horrible name! You'll have all the others calling her by it as well.'

Dove was giggling helplessly on the swing.

'Stop it, you two! I can't work this thing properly if you make me laugh. I shall fall off, if you're not careful, and knock all the gravy out of you!'

While they were in the midst of their diversions, a group of servants from the Ning-guo mansion came rushing up in a state of great agitation.

'Sir Jing is dead!'

'*Dead*?' Everyone gearing them was incredulous. 'But he hadn't been ill. How can he have died so suddenly?'

'He spent all his time looking for the secret of immortality.' Said one of the servants. 'Perhaps he found it and went off to heaven.'

You-shi heard the news with dismay. There would be so much to do, and with Cousin Zhen, Jia Rong and Jia Lian all three away, no dependable male around to help her. The

first thing she did, of course, was to remove all her jewellery and the ornaments from her hair. Then, having ordered some of the household to go on ahead and put all the Taoists there under lock and key pending her husband's return, she got into her carriage and drove with all speed to the Dark Truth Monastery outside the city, accompanied by the Chief Steward Lai Sheng's wife and several of the senior stewardesses. Meanwhile other servants were dispatched to various members of the faculty requesting their attendance at the monastery.

The physicians duly arrived. As the patient was already dead, there was little scope for their customary methods of diagnosis; but they knew that Sir Jing had gone in for breath-control and various other kinds of Taoist hocus-pocus, some of which, like the worship of the Seven Stars, the keeping of 'ghost-worm' vigils and the swallowing of mercuric 'elixirs', must have gravely weakened his constitution and may well have hastened his death; and when they saw the **purple** face and cracked and shrivelled lips of the corpse and felt the iron-hard abdomen, they had little difficulty in forming their collective opinion, which their spokesman delivered forthwith to the waiting women: 'That death was due to edema and corrosion following ingestion by the deceased of some toxic metallic substance in pursuance of his Taoist researches.'

'It *wasn't* toxic,' protested the Taoists, alarmed for their own safety. 'It was an infallible secret formula, but it needed to be taken in the right conditions. We *told* him he wasn't ready for it, but he wouldn't believe us. He must have taken it during the vigil last night, when he was meditating on his own and there was nobody around to stop him. He will have gone straight to heaven, of course: such faith is sure to be rewarded. We must rejoice that he has cast off the corrupt garment of flesh and left this sea of misery behind him.'

But You-shi had no intention of getting drawn into an argument. Her only reply was to give orders that they should all be locked up again and remain so until Cousin Zhen could deal with them when he got back. Riders were dispatched post-haste to inform him of his father's death.

You-shi could see at a glance that the monastery's accommodation was far too cramped for the lying-in-state; on the

other hand there could be no question of her taking the corpse back with her into the city. She therefore had it wrapped up and carried in a curtained chair to the Temple of the Iron Threshold. And as she calculated that it would probably be at least half a month before Cousin Zhen got back, by which time, as this was the hottest part of the year, the process of decomposition would already be well advanced, she decided, acting on her own initiative, to consult an astrologer and find out the earliest date on which the body could be encoffined. The coffin was conveniently to hand, having been deposited in the Temple of the Iron Threshold when it was purchased some years previously. The formal going into mourning and its attendant ceremonies were scheduled to take place three days later. Staging was put up in readiness for the Taoists and Buddhists, but their requiems were to be deferred until Cousin Zhen should have returned.

While You-shi and the already depleted staff were attending to these matters outside the city, no one with authority was left in the two mansions able to deal with callers from outside. On the Rong-guo side Xi-feng was still unable to see people because of her illness, Li Wan was fully occupied in looking after the young people, and Bao-yu was too lacking in savoir-faire to be trusted. It was necessary to call in a number of obscure junior clansmen who had done occasional odd-jobs for the family in the past: Jia Bin, Jia Guang, Jia Heng(1), Jia Chang and Jia Ling. On the Ning-guo side even the internal running of the household was a problem, since You-shi was for the time being unable to get back at all. She had to call on her step-mother, old Mrs You, to keep an eye on things for her. As Mrs You had two young unmarried daughters by a previous marriage, the most sensible arrangement seemed to be to bring the girls with her and install herself in temporary residence at Ning-guo House.

At this point our story moves elsewhere. As soon as the news reached him of his father's death, Cousin Zhen made an urgent application for leave of absence to the Board of Rites. He included Jia Rong's name in the petition, since Jia Rong was, nominally at any rate, the holder of a commission. The officials of the Board of Rites, bearing in mind His

Imperial Majesty's devotion to the Late Emperor and determination to give fullest expression to it in these obsequies of the Late Emperor's favourite Consort, dared not grant leave of absence on their own initiative and referred the matter to the Emperor himself in a memorial. But the Son of Heaven, with that godlike compassion that is so typical of him, far from making his own bereavement an objection, saw it as all the more reason for sympathizing with the bereavement of a subject - particularly one whose ancestor had performed such great and signal services for the Crown. His immediate reaction on reading the memorial was to ask for particulars of Jia Jing's official rank. The Board of Rites memorialized back as follows:

Jia Jing: Palace Graduate, Second Class. His hereditary office and emoluments were passed on during his

lifetime to his son Jia Zhen. Owing to age and ill-health, he had for some years past been living in religious seclusion at the Dark Truth Monastery, where he was resident at the time of his death. Jia Zhen and his son Jia Rong are in attendance here at the mausoleum for the obsequies of Her Late Highness and are Your Imperial Majesty's petitioners for leave to absent themselves in order to attend to the funeral arrangements.

On receipt of this memorial His Imperial Majesty was graciously pleased to issue the following Rescript:

Although Jia Jing's own life appears to have been undistinguished by service to the state, nevertheless in recognition of the distinguished record of loyal service to the Crown of his grandfather the Duke of Ning-guo it is Our pleasure that a Court appointment carrying the honours and entitlements of an officer of the Fifth Rank should be bestowed upon him posthumously, and that his son and grandson should be authorized to convey his remains into the Capital, entering by way of the Lower North Gate, and to display them there in their private residence in the customary manner; and thereafter, having duly carried Out all rites and ceremonies that are lawful to be performed, to convey them thence to the deceased's registered place of origin for interment. And furthermore it is Our pleasure that Our treasury at the Imperial Victuallers should disburse to the said son and grandson a sum being the equivalent of one portion of funeral offerings of the First

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Grade towards the defrayment of the said Jia Jing's funeral expenses; and that it should he lawful and permitted for holders of Court appointments up to and including the rank of Prince and Duke to make offerings and condolences.

When the contents of this Rescript were made known, it was not only the members of the Jia family who expressed their gratitude: all the great officers of the Court were loud in their praises of this extraordinary example of Imperial magnanimity.

Cousin Zhen and Jia Rong at once set off on horseback, determined to ride both night and day until they reached their destination. About half way along their road they came upon a group of horsemen riding hell-for-leather towards them who turned out to be Jia Bin and Jia Guang at the head of a party of Jia family domestics. They threw themselves from their saddles as soon as they recognized Cousin Zhen and touched knee and hand to the ground in the Manchu salute.

'Why have you come?' Cousin Zhen asked them.

'Mrs Zhen was worried that when you and Rong left there would be no one to escort Her Old Ladyship,' Jia Bin replied, 'so she sent us to take your place.'

Cousin Zhen expressed his approval of his wife's thoughtfulness.

'And what about things at home?' he asked. 'How have you been managing?'

Jia Bin told him how You-shi had had the Taoists put under arrest, how she had had Jia Jing's body moved to the family temple, and how, in order that there might be someone at home to keep an eye on things during her absence, she had persuaded her step-mother and two step-sisters to move into temporary residence at Ning-guo House. At mention of the two step-sisters the face of Jia Rong, who had dismounted when the others did, was observed to break into a grin. For his part Cousin Zhen merely nodded, observed several times over that these arrangements were 'very sensible', and, touching the riding-whip to his horse's flanks, was on his way once more.

Cousin Zhen and Jia Rong rode on then through daylight

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and darkness, stopping at post-houses along the way only long enough to obtain a change of mount. It was night-time when they approached the outskirts of the Capital and well after two in the morning when they reached the Temple of the Iron Threshold. Those keeping watch had to rouse the others up to meet them. Cousin Zhen and Jia Rong dismounted and lifted up their voices in loud walling. Still wailing, they crawled on their knees all the way from the Outer gate of the temple to the lying-in-state room inside. There, at the foot of the coffin, they knocked their heads repeatedly on the floor and wept with abandon until daylight, by which time they had all but lost their voices.

After a brief intermission during which Cousin Zhen was greeted by You-shi and the rest (for he had not, till that moment, had an opportunity of speaking to them) he and Jia Rong changed into the appropriate hempen mourning-garments before returning to bow once more at the foot of the coffin.

Cousin Zhen found it impossible to achieve quite that state of self-absorbed grief - 'oblivious to all around' - which books of etiquette require of the bereaved son: there were too many things that needed attending to. For example, friends and relations had to be informed about the Gracious Rescript permitting a lying-in-state at the mansion and the receiving of offerings and condolences there. Jia Rong was ordered back home to make all preparations necessary for receiving the coffin.

Jia Rong was pleased with his commission. Hurrying to horse, he rode briskly into the city. As soon as he got back, he ordered the servants to begin clearing the furniture from the front reception hall at Ning-guo House and

making a shrine for the coffin there out of screens and hangings. He also told them to put up awnings for the funeral bands outside the doorway, and a cloth and cane archway which should later be covered with funerary inscriptions. When he was satisfied that all this work was well in hand, he hurried into the inner apartments to meet his grandmother and two young aunts.

The Hon. Mrs You (the late Mr You - You-shi's father –

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had been a mandarin of the sixth rank) was an elderly lady much given to taking naps. She was in fact recumbent upon the kang and refreshing herself with sleep at the moment when Jia Rong entered. It was the two daughters, sewing amidst their maids, who welcomed him.

'I'm glad you've come, Auntie,' said Jia Rong, grinning broadly at the elder of them. (Her name was Er-jie.) 'Father has been *longing* to see you.'

Er-jie turned **red.**

'Now look here, young Rong,' she said, 'you behave yourself! I suppose you are one of those people who, if they don't get a good telling-off every once in a while, don't feel comfortable. You are supposed to be a well-bred, educated young gentleman, yet a coolie would have better manners.'

She picked up the nearest object to hand, which happened to be a flat-iron, and made as if to aim it at his head. Jia Rong ducked in alarm, clasping his head in his arms; he ducked not away from her, however, but towards her, and ended up on her bosom, laughing and begging for mercy. At this the younger sister, San-jie, came over and tried to fasten her nails upon his mouth.

'We'll tell our sister about you when she gets back.'

Jia Rong knelt between them on the kang, entreating them not to, whereupon the two sisters collapsed in laughter.

He noticed that Er$_1$ie was eating cardamums and made a grab at them intending to take some for himself. As he did so, Er-jie spat a chewed-up mouthful of them in his face. Quite unperturbedly, he began licking off the particles that he could reach with his tongue and nibbling them. This was more than even the maids could stomach.

'Look at you, freshly in mourning and your old grannie lying there right under your nose!' they said. 'These *are* your aunts, after all, even though they are so young: you ought to have more respect for your mother than to treat her family like this. Wait till we tell the Master when he gets back: he'll give you what for!'

Temporarily abandoning his aunts, Jia Rong went over to the maids, put his arms around two of them and began kissing them.

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'My darlings, you are so right! I shan't interfere with them any more.'

The maids pushed him off indignantly.

'Pig!' The maid who said this spoke with feeling. 'You have a wife and maids of your own; what do you need to come bothering us for? An understanding person would realize that this was only fun, but what about someone who didn't know? There are plenty of dirty-minded, gossiping busybodies who would be only too pleased to go tattling about this sort of thing to the other mansion, and before you know where you are the gossips there will be passing round the most terrible stories about us.'

'Their household is completely separate from ours,' said Jia Rong, 'why should they bother about what we do here? Anyway, they've got scandal enough of their own to keep them busy! Every family history has got a few scandals in it. Look at the stories they tell about the rulers of the Han and Tang dynasties: "Filthy Tang and stinking Han" they say, don't they? If even the families of emperors were like that, you can hardly expect ours to be any different. As for the household next door: look how strict Great-uncle She is, yet Uncle Lian still manages to get up to a few tricks with that little chamber-wife; and look what a tough nut Aung Feng is, yet that didn't stop Uncle Rui thinking he could settle her business. Do you imagine I don't know what they get up to over there -?'

He seemed to be warming to the subject and would doubtless have treated them to other even less edifying examples of Rong-guo depravity, had not the old lady suddenly woken up at that point, necessitating an abrupt change of manner. At once he dropped down on his knee and began inquiring solicitously about her health.

'It is so good of you to have gone to all this trouble for us, Grandma,' he said, 'and for Auntie Er and Auntie San to put up with so much inconvenience on our behalf. Father and I don't know how to thank you. I expect after this business is over we shall all be coming round to your place and making you a kotow.'

'Bless the boy, what eloquence!' said the old lady, nodding

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appreciatively. 'For our own kin, though: it's the least we could do. And how is your father?' she asked him. 'When did he hear the news? When did you get back?'

'We've only just got back,' said Jia Rong. 'Father sent me on to see you immediately. He was particularly anxious that I should persuade you to stay here until everything is over.'

He winked at the two young aunts while he was saying this. Er-jie pretended to grind her teeth angrily, though

she was trying not to laugh.

'Glib-tongued little ape!' she said. 'We're to be kept around here as second strings for your father, I suppose?'

'Don't you worry!' said Jia Rong, his eye on the old lady. 'My father has your interests very much at heart. He's been looking for years now for a couple of well-placed, rich, handsome young husbands for my two aunties. Now he's found one at last - someone he met the other day on the journey.'

He was only joking, but the old lady took it all as gospel truth and asked him what the name was of this prospective son-in-law. Er-jie, laughing, laid down her sewing and ran across to strike him.

'Don't believe a word he says, Ma! He's a wicked liar!'

Even the maids were outraged.

'If the Lord in Heaven can hear you, you'd better watch Out for the lightning!' said one of them.

Just then a servant entered:

'We've finished all the things you told us to do, Master Rong. Will you go back now and tell the Master it's all ready?'

Off went Jia Rong then, smiling all over his face.

But what happened after that will be told in the following chapter.

CHAPTER *64*

Five fair women make subjects for
a chaste maid's verse
And nine jade dragons make a
Love-gift for a flirt

As soon as Jia Rong learned that evening was ready, he returned to the temple and reported to his father to that effect. At once preparations for the procession into the city were put in motion. Bearers were organized, insignia, funeral banners and all the other paraphernalia got ready overnight, and messengers hurriedly sent out to relations and friends telling them when the procession would set out: five o'clock on the morning of the fourth.

The procession, needless to say, was of dazzling magnificence, and troops of mourners took part in it. It provoked varying reactions from the crowd numbering many thousands who lined the road to watch it, all the way from the Temple of the Iron Threshold to the gates of Ning-guo House. Some took a simple pleasure in the spectacle; others admired the wealth which had created it; but there were also a few sour-faced Confucian scholars who looked down their noses and muttered something about sumptuousness being no substitute for grief. A buzz of discussion followed its passing all along the route.

The procession reached the mansion at about three in the afternoon; the coffin was deposited in its shrine in the main hall; offerings were made; the lament was raised. After that the mourners began gradually to depart. Only those members of the Jia clan remained who had undertaken to lend the family a hand with the reception. Among relations not of the Jia surname the only one to stay behind was Lady Xing's brother, Xing De-quan.

As long as there were visitors around, convention obliged Cousin Zhen and Jia Rong to remain in appropriately grief-

stricken attitudes beside the coffin, conforming, as far as possible, to the scriptural canons on mourning which enjoin the bereaved son, among other things, to 'lie upon rushes with a sod of earth for his pillow'; but as soon as the last guest had gone, they were off like a shot to enjoy the society of their young female relations inside.

Throughout this period Bao-yu too was expected to put on mourning and go over every day to Ning-guo House to spend the whole day there beside the coffin. Xi-feng was not well enough to go over daily, but on days when there were sutra-readings and the callers were numerous, she would drag herself over and lend You-shi a hand in entertaining the wives.

One morning after the early offering, when Cousin Zhen and Jia Rong, worn out by a succession of short nights and long, exhausting days, lay dozing beside the coffin, Bao-yu thought that as there were no visitors he might just as well go back home and see Dai-yu. Calling at **Green** Delights on the way, he found the courtyard silent and deserted. In the coolness of the surrounding gallery a few old women and junior maids were sitting or lying about in various postures of sleep. He had no wish to disturb them, and would have made his way into the house alone; but just as he was approaching the doorway, Number Four caught sight of him and started up, intending to raise the blind for him to enter. She had not time to do so however, for at that very moment Parfumee came rushing out and very nearly ran into him. She checked herself just in time.

'What are you doing here?' There was an expression of pleased surprise on her face. 'Don't let Skybright get me! She's trying to hit me.'

Inside the room there was a clatter of numerous tiny objects striking the floor and a moment later Skybright

burst through the doorway in pursuit.
‘Where are you, you little wretch? If you’ve lost, you have to have a slap. It’s no good running to Bao-yu to protect you:
he isn’t here today.’
Bao-yu laughingly intercepted her.
‘She’s only little. I don’t know how she’s offended you, but won’t you forgive her for my sake?’

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Bao-yu’s sudden appearance at that moment was so unexpected that Skybright found it comical.
‘Parfumee must be a little witch! I wouldn’t have thought even magic spells could bring someone so quickly! Well, I don’t care I she said, having recovered somewhat from her surprise. ‘Magic or no magic, I’m going to get her!’
She wrested the arm free that Bao-yu was holding and darted at Partumee; but Parfumee dodged behind Bao-yu’s back and clung to him. Bao-yu took Skybright by one hand and Parfumee by the other and walked with them into the room. There, on the kang under the west wall, Musk, Ripple, Emerald and Swallow sat playing dibs: melon-seeds for winners and slaps for losers. Parfumee had lost to Skybright and run out to avoid the slap. The clattering noise that Bao-yu had heard was the sound of dib-stones falling from Skybright’s lap when she got up to chase her. Bao-yu surveyed the scene approvingly.
‘I thought you’d be a bit quiet here with me away,’ he said. ‘And as the days are so long now, I was afraid you might be going to sleep after lunch and making yourselves ill. I’m glad you’ve found a way of keeping yourselves amused - Where’s Aroma?’ he asked, suddenly noticing that she was not with them.
‘Oh, Aroma,’ said Skybright. ‘Aroma’s gone religious. She’s sitting on her own in the next room like Bodhidharma with her face to the wall. I haven’t dared disturb her so I haven’t the least idea what she’s doing. Whatever it is, she’s being very quiet about it. You’d better go in and have a look:
perhaps she’s attained Enlightenment!’
Bao-yu laughed and went into the inner room. He found Aroma sitting on the couch by the window making knots in a length of grey silk cord. She rose to her feet as he entered.
‘What lies has that wretch Skybright been telling about me? I wanted to get on with this knotting, that’s what I came in here for. I hadn’t got time to fool about with the others, so I pretended that I wanted to take advantage of your being away by sitting here quietly on my own and meditating for a bit. Bodhidharma, indeed! I’ll pinch that girl’s mouth!’
Bao-yu laughed and sat down beside her to watch her knot.

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‘The days are so long now, you *ought* to take a break of some kind. If you don’t fancy playing with the others, why not come with me to see Cousin Lin? Surely it’s much too hot for knotting?’
‘I noticed that you’re still wearing that old black fan-over we made for you when you went into mourning for Mrs Rong. As long as you were only wearing it once or twice a year, it didn’t seem worth the trouble of replacing it; but now that you have to wear summer mourning every day at the other House, I thought it was high time I made you a new one. As soon as I’ve finished this cord for it, you can take the old one off and put it on. I know *you* don’t care very much about this sort of thing, but if Her Old Ladyship were to see you wearing the old one when she got back, she’d be sure to blame me for neglecting you. She’d say I was too lazy even to notice what you were wearing.’
Bao-yu smiled.
‘It’s very nice of you to have thought about it. But don’t drive yourself too hard. You don’t want to give yourself a heat stroke.’
At that moment Partumee came in carrying a cup of watercooled tea for him on a tray. Because as a little boy he had been delicate, Bao-yu was never given ice-cold tea to drink in summer. To cool his tea they plunged the tea-pot into a basin of water freshly drawn from the well. The water was changed several times until the tea inside the pot, though not chilled, had reached a pleasant freshness. He drank half the contents of the cup while Parfumee held it to his lips, then turned his head back again to address Aroma.
‘I told Tealeaf when I left that if anyone important turns up at Cousin Zhen’s, he is to let me know immediately; otherwise I shan’t be going back there.’
He got up to go. As he was leaving the house; he called back to Emerald and the others in the outer room:
‘If I’m wanted for anything, you’ll find me at Miss Lin’s.’ On his way there, just as he was about to cross Drenched Blossoms Bridge, he came upon Snowgoose followed by two old women carrying an assortment of caltrops, melons and lotus-roots.

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‘What are they for?’ Bao-yu asked her. ‘I know your mistress never eats that sort of thing. Is she expecting Mrs Zhu or someone?’

‘If I tell you, you mustn’t let on when you see her,’ said Snowgoose.
Bao-yu nodded.
‘You can go on ahead and give that stuff to Miss Nightingale,’ Snowgoose said to the two women. ‘If she asks you why I’m not with you, tell her I’m doing something and I’ll be back directly.’
The women made some reply and continued on their way. Snowgoose waited until they were out of earshot.
‘The Mistress has been feeling a bit better this last day or two. But when Miss Tan looked in after lunch today and wanted her to go with her to call on Mrs Lian, she wouldn’t go. She appeared to be thinking about something and had a little cry. Then presently she picked up her writing-brush and did a lot of writing - poetry I think. She told me to send out for some melons and things. While I did that, she said, Nightingale was to clear the *qin*-table in the inner room, move it into the outside room, and put the dragon incense-burner on it. She said she’d tell us what to do with the melons when I got back. If she’s planning to entertain someone, I don’t see what she wants the incense-burner for - certainly not for burning incense in, because she doesn’t like incense as a rule. She likes to have fresh flowers and fruit and gourds about her but not incense because she doesn’t like the smell of it in her clothes. Anyway, if she does want to burn some, why not in the inner room, where she spends all her time? Unless it’s because the old women have made the outer room a bit smelly and she’s burning it to get rid of the smell. The fact is, I really don’t know. You’ll have to go and find out for yourself.’
While she was speaking, Bao-yu had unconsciously lowered his head.
‘From what Snowgoose says,’ he thought, ‘there must be some other reason for this. She wouldn’t have things put out specially if she were merely entertaining one of the girls. Perhaps today is the anniversary of Aunt Lin’s death. No, just a bit: it can’t be. When it is, Grandma always sends her

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the stuff for the offering and she’s done that already this year. Perhaps it’s for a seasonal offering. Perhaps she’s been reading the *Doctrine of the Mean:*

In each season of the year ... offer things seasonable

It’s possible. If I go and see her now, when she is feeling upset, I am sure to want to talk her out of it and shall probably only succeed in causing her to suppress her grief. On the other hand, if I *don’t* go, then with no one there to stop her, she may simply go on getting more and more upset. Either way will be bad for her. The best thing will be for me to go and see Cousin Feng first, sit with her for a bit, and look in at Cousin Lin’s on my way back. Then, if she is still upset, I shall try to find some means of consoling her. In that way I shall be able to prevent her grief from getting Out of hand, though at the same time she will have had a chance of giving it expression, so that there will be no danger of its being unhealthily repressed.’
Having come to this decision, he let Snowgoose go on to the Naiad’s House alone and made his way out of the Garden to Xi-feng’s place. He arrived just as a number of womenservants who had been reporting on household matters were leaving. Xi-feng herself was leaning inside the gateway talking to Patience. She smiled at Bao-yu as she saw him come.
‘You’ve come back, then? I’ve just this moment been telling Lin Zhi-xiao’s wife to send someone over to the other place to tell your pages that if you don’t appear to be doing anything they ought to slip in and ask you to come back here for a rest. I was afraid that in this hot weather with so many people milling around there, you might find the sweaty smells a bit too much for you. But you’ve come back anyway, so I needn’t have bothered.’
‘Thank you for the kind thought, though,’ said Bao-yu. ‘I decided to come back here partly because there was nothing there for me to do, but also because I noticed that you haven’t been over there for some days and I wanted to see if you were all right. How are you feeling lately?’
‘Oh, still pretty much the same,’ said Xi-feng. ‘Still up one day and down the next. Now that Grandmother and your

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> mother are away, those senior women are getting quite out of hand, fighting or quarrelling about something or other every day. We’ve even had cases of gambling and thieving recently. Of course, your sister is a great help; but she’s a young unmarried girl and there are certain things she can’t be told about. When they crop up, I have to struggle out of bed and deal with them myself. So I don’t really get a lot of rest. Under the circumstances there’s not much prospect yet of getting better: all I can hope is that I shan’t get any worse!’

‘I know. But you’ve got to look after yourself,’ said Bao-yu. ‘You must try not to worry so much.’
He chatted with her a little longer before going back into the Garden. Arriving at the Naiad’s House, he could see the remains of incense smoke as he entered the courtyard gate. In the outer room there was a wet patch on the flagstones where a libation had been poured, and Nightingale was supervising the removal of the *qin*-table to the inside room and the replacement of various other objects and bits of furniture. Concluding that the little

service (if that is what it had been) must just be over, he went inside. Dai-yu was lying down with her face to the wall. She looked ill and exhausted. At the sound of Nightingale's 'Master Bao, Miss', she raised herself wearily, though with a smiling face, and invited him to sit by her.

'How have you been these last few days, coz?'he said. 'You look a bit calmer than you did, but something seems to have been upsetting you.'

'I can't imagine why you should say so,' said Dai-yu. 'I am perfectly all right.'

'How can you expect me to believe that?' said Bao-yu. 'The tears are still wet on your face. You should learn to take things a bit easier. It is bad for a person who has so much illness to be constantly indulging in grief. If you end up by under-miring your health; I-'

The realization that what he was about to say was probably something that ought not to be said caused the words to stick in his throat. For although, from the fact that he and Dai-yu had grown up together, there existed a most perfect sympathy between them, although there was nothing in the world that either of them wanted more than to live and die in each other's

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company, the understanding that this was so was a wordless one which had never been expressed. In the past, because Dai-yu was so sensitive, words had all too often proved a stumbling-block. And now today, when the whole point of his coming here was to comfort her, here he was again, on the point of saying something that would offend her! Finding that he could not go on, a sort of panic gripped him. He feared he was going to make her angry; and yet he so desperately wanted to help her. As he thought about it, the panic gave way to a feeling of helpless sadness and he began to cry.

Dai-yu, sensing that he was about to make one of those extravagant statements that she always found so irritating, had indeed been on the point of getting angry; but when she saw his internal struggle and the tears which followed it, she felt not angry with him but moved, and being herself of a tearful disposition, was soon sitting there in silence and weeping with him for company. To Nightingale, who came in at that moment with some tea, it appeared as if they must have been having a quarrel.

'Just when Miss Lin is getting along nicely,' she said to Bao-yu with some asperity, 'what do you mean by coming along here and upsetting her?'

'I've done no such thing.'

Bao-yu laughed and wiped his eyes.

To cover up his embarrassment, he got up and began pacing about the room. In doing so, he caught sight of a sheet of paper sticking out from underneath Dai-yu's inkstone. The temptation to reach out and pick it up proved irresistible, and before Dai-yu could get up and snatch it from him, he had put it in the bosom of his gown.

'Let me read it, Dai!'

'Whatever you come here about,' said Dai-yu, 'you always seem to end up by nosing through my papers.'

Bao-chai came in while she was speaking.

'What is it you want to read, cousin?' she asked Bao-yu.

Bao-yu still had no idea what the piece of paper contained, and because he was uncertain what Dai-yu's feelings would be about his reading it, he hesitated to answer Bao-chai's question for fear of giving Dai-yu offence. He therefore

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smiled and said nothing, while all the time his eyes rested on Dai-yu questioningly. Dai-yu smiled at Bao-chai and invited her to be seated.

'I've been looking at some lives of famous women,' said Dai-yu, 'all of them women who are famous in history for their beauty or intelligence. There was so much I found moving - heartening and admirable in some cases, tragic and deplorable in others - that after lunch today, having nothing better to do, I decided to make a selection of them and try writing poems about them in which some of those feelings could be expressed. Then Tan-chun came in and asked me to go with her to see Cousin Feng, but I didn't feel up to it. After doing only five of the poems I had planned, I suddenly felt too tired to go on and left them lying there on the table, little thinking that Master Bao would come along and discover them. I wouldn't really mind his seeing them if it weren't for the fear that he might go copying them out and showing them to other people.'

'When did I ever do such a thing?' said Bao-yu indignantly. 'If you're referring to the White Crab-flower poems on that fan, I wrote them on it myself in small *kai-shu* characters merely for the convenience of always having them by me when I wanted to look at them. I fully realize that poems written in the privacy of the

women's quarters are not lightly to be passed around outside. Ever since you spoke to me about it, I have been careful not to carry that fan with me anywhere but inside the Garden.'
'Cousin Lin is right to be worried,' said Bao-chai. 'Now that the poems are written on that fan, there is always the possibility that you might one day forget and carry it with you to your room outside. Suppose Uncle's literary gentlemen were to see it there, they would be sure to ask you who the poems were by. If as a result of that they were to become public property, it would be extremely unpleasant for us. "A stupid woman is a virtuous one": that is what the old proverb says. A girl's first concern is to be virtuous, her second is to be industrious. She may write poetry if she likes as a diversion, but it is an accomplishment she could just as well do without. The last thing girls of good family need is a literary reputation.' She

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paused and gave Dai-yu a smile. 'There would be no harm in letting *me* see them of course. The important thing is not to allow Cousin Bao to go off with them.'
'In the light of what you have just been saying,' said Dai-yu drily, 'I'm not at all sure that I ought to let you look at them either. Anyway,' she pointed to Bao-yu, 'he's already got them.'
Bao-yu assumed from her tone that he might read them. Extracting the paper from the inside pocket of his gown, he drew up close to Bao-chai so that the two of them could peruse it together. This is what they read.

Xi Shi
That kingdom-quelling beauty dissolved like the flower of foam.
In the foreign palace, *Xi Shi*, did you yearn for your old home?
Who laughs at your ugly neighbour with her frown-and-simper now,
Still steeping her yam at the brook-side, and the hair snow-white on her brow?

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Yu Ji

The very crows ate grieving as they caw in the cold night air. She faces her beaten Tyrant King with a haggard look of despair:
'Let the others wait for the hangman, to be hacked and quartered and rent;
'Better the taste of one's own steel in the decent dark of a tent.'

*

Lady Bright

To a loveliness that dazzled, the palace of Han showed the door;
For 'the fair are mostly ill-fated', as has been said often before.
Yet it seems strange that an emperor - even one with such tepid views -Should abandon his eyes' own judgement and let a painter choose!

*

***Green** Pearl*

Pebble or pearl - to Shi Chong it was only a rich man's whim:
Do you really believe your undoubted charms meant so very much to him?

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Itwas fate, from some past life preordained, that made him take his rash stand,
And the craving to have a companion in death's dark, silent land.

*

Red Duster

She marked the firm, courteous protest, the well-phrased confident plan,
And, under the unsuccessful clerk, saw the essential Man.
The great Yang Su in her eyes was finished from that hour:
He could not hold a girl like her for all his pomp and power.

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After praising the poems enthusiastically, Bao-yu suggested that, as there were five of them, a good collective title would be 'Songs for Five Fair Women'; and without waiting for Dai-yu's approval, he picked up her writing-brush and wrote it on the left-hand side of the sheet after the poems.
'Whatever subject one chooses for a poem,' said Bao -chai, 'it is important that one's treatment of it should be original. If one merely plods along in the footsteps of earlier poets, it doesn't matter how fine the language is, the lack of originality will prevent it from being a really good poem. Thus, many poets have taken Lady Bright as their theme, but the best ones have always contrived to give the subject a new turn, one emphasizing the sad fate of Lady Bright herself, another the wickedness of the painter Ma Yan-shou, another the frivolousness of the Han emperor who employed him to paint portraits of court ladies rather than portraits of distinguished statesmen and soldiers, and so on. Further new twists were given to this theme by Wang An-shi:

What brush could ever capture a beauty's breathing grace?
The painter did not merit death who botched that lovely face.

and by Ou-yang Xiu:

A prince so ill able to control what went on under his nose
Must hope in vain to impose his rule on remote barbarian foes.

Cousin Lin shows the same originality as these two poets, by presenting each of her subjects in a novel and interesting light -'

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Before she could continue with her disquisition, a servant came in to announce that Jia Lian was back. His arrival at the Ning mansion had been reported some time ago and he was expected any moment at Rong-guo House. Bao-yu at once got up and, hurrying out to the front part of the mansion, waited inside the main gate for his cousin to arrive. He did not have to wait long. Within moments Jia Lian was dismounting from his horse and stepping through the gateway. Bao-yu advanced to meet him, touched hand and knee to the ground in greeting, and wished good health, first, as was good manners, to his grandmother and mother, from whom Jia Lian had come, and then to Jia Lian himself. The cousins then went inside together, hand in hand. Li Wan, Xi-feng, Bao-chai, Dai-yu, Ying-chun, Tan-chun and Xi-chun were already waiting for Jia Lian in the hall. After each of them had greeted him individually, he gave them his news.
'Grandmother will be arriving here early tomorrow. She's been keeping very well on the journey. Today she sent me on ahead to make sure that everything here is all right. I shall be leaving again tomorrow at four o'clock in the morning and going out of the city to meet her.'
They asked him a few questions about the journey, but because they knew how tired he must be after so much travel, soon left him so that he could go back to his own room and get some rest. About the remainder of that day our narrative is silent.
Grandmother Jia and Lady Wang arrived home round about lunchtime the following day. When the initial greetings were over, the old lady sat for a while and sipped a cup of tea before taking Lady Wang and the others with her to Ning-guo House. A great walling rose up as she arrived. Jia She and Jia Lian had gone there after seeing the old lady home, and as she and her party entered the room in which the coffin stood, the two of them advanced to meet her at the head of a number of weeping clansmen, and supported her one on each side as she approached the coffin. At the foot of it Cousin Zhen and Jia Rong knelt down, pressing their heads against her skirts and weeping piteously. To people of advancing years even simulated grief is distressing, and Grandmother Jia, an arm about

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each head, wept very bitterly herself, Jia She and Jia Lian did their best to comfort her, and at last, when her grief had somewhat abated, she moved on, to the right of the coffin-screens, where You-shi and her daughter-in-law were waiting for her. Here there was more clinging and weeping, after which those present came forward one by one to salute Grandmother Jia and welcome her in a more normal fashion.

Cousin Zhen, fearing that Grandmother Jia, who had still not rested properly after her tiring journey, would become distressed if she were to sit much longer in such melancholy surroundings, strongly urged her not to stay. When at last he had prevailed on her to go and she was back in her own apartment at Rong-guo House, it became

evident that the shock of mourning, following so soon upon the discomforts of travel, had indeed had an adverse effect on her ageing constitution. By nightfall she was showing all the symptoms of incipient illness: heaviness in the head, a constricted feeling in the chest, a blocked-up nose and hoarseness of the voice. The doctor was summoned immediately and half that night and the whole of the following day taken up with consultations, prescriptions and the preparation and administering of medicine. Fortunately the illness had not yet established itself in her system and responded rapidly to treatment. There was a slight outbreak of perspiration round about midnight of the second night and after that her pulse and temperature both returned to normal. Everyone breathed a sigh of relief; though to be on the safe side they kept up the dosage for another day.

A few days later it was Jia Jing's 'funeral' - in this case no mote than the re-depositing of his coffin in the family temple. Grandmother Jia was still not well enough to take part; Bao-yu stayed at home to look after his grandmother; and Xi-feng was still insufficiently recovered. Apart from them, all the other members of the Rong-guo family, Jia She, Jia Lian, Lady Xing and Lady Wang, together with all the men- and women-servants of their households, accompanied their Ning-guo cousins to the Temple of the Iron Threshold. They were back again that evening; but Cousin Zhen, You-shi and Jia Rong stayed on at the temple for the Hundred Days, at the

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end of which Jia Jing was to be taken to his final resting-place in Nanking. Old Mrs You and her two daughters remained all this while at the Ning-guo mansion to keep an eye on things.

Jia Lian had heard a good deal in the past about these two step-sisters of You-shi, though, to his great regret, he had never until very recently had an opportunity of meeting them. The opportunity had presented itself on the occasion of Jia Jing's removal into the city. Since then they had become fairly well acquainted. Acquaintanceship in his case (Jia Lian being what he was) had been accompanied by the first stirrings of lust. He felt encouraged by an unsavoury rumour he had heard to the effect that his cousins Zhen and Rong, both father and son, had at one time or another enjoyed the sisters' favours. Whenever he had a chance to, he flirted or made eyes at them -unsuccessfully in San-jie's case, for she met all his advances with indifference, but with a more promising reaction from her sister. Unfortunately, with so many pairs of eyes watching, he could not follow up his success, apart from which he was a little scared that Cousin Zhen might be jealous. Between him and Er-jie it could be said that there was a silent understanding; but for the time being there could be nothing more.

This all changed after the funeral. Then, at Ning-guo House, apart from Mrs You and the two sisters and a few maids and older women employed to do the rough work, hardly anyone from the master apartment was left behind. All the personal maids, parlour maids and concubines stayed with their master and mistress at the temple. As for the married servants, their activities were confined to keeping watch at night and minding the gates by day; and since they had their own quarters outside, they had no reason to go inside the house except when they were on duty. This seemed to Jia Lian to be an excellent time to act. A pretended wish to keep Cousin Zhen company at the temple gave him an excuse for absenting himself fr6m his own house, whilst the pretext of attending to household matters on Cousin Zhen's behalf enabled him to make several trips back to Ning-guo House, thus providing him with further opportunities for pursuing his flirtation with Er-jie.

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One day Yu Lu, a junior steward from Ning-guo House, came out to see Cousin Zhen about some business.

‘The total cost of the procession, including funeral furnishings and hire of labour, was one thousand one hundred and ten taels. Of that, five hundred taels have already been paid, leaving six hundred and ten taels outstanding. Yesterday I had the managers of both agencies round asking me for the rest of the money. I thought I’d better see you about it and ask you what I’m to do.’

‘Why didn’t you go straight to the counting-house and draw what’s wanted?’ said Cousin Zhen. ‘I don’t see why you should need to come bothering *me* about it.,

‘I did go to the counting-house, sir,’ said Yu Lu, ‘but since Sir Jing passed away they have already paid out so much that they’ve barely got enough left to pay for the Hundred Days services and the expenses of your stay here in the temple. They couldn’t pay these bills without eating into what has been earmarked for something else. That’s why I’ve come out to see you. I wondered whether you would want me to pay them out of your personal account, or whether there’s some other account you could transfer the money from. If you will let me know what you want me to do, I’ll go ahead and do it.’

Cousin Zhen laughed.

‘The days when we had money lying around unused in private accounts have long since passed. You’ll have to borrow the money where you can.’

it was Yu Lu’s turn to laugh.

‘If it were one hundred or two hundred taels, sir, I might be able to manage something; but five or six hundred? Where would I get a sum like that at short notice?’

After thinking for a bit, Cousin Zhen turned to Jia Rong:

‘Go to your mother, Rong, and ask her for that five hundred taels the Zhens of Nanking sent us after the funeral. It hasn’t been handed in to the counting-house yet. And ask her to have a rake-around and see if she can’t raise the whole sum.’

Jia Rong hurried off. In a very short time he was back again with his mother’s answer.

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‘Mother says two hundred of the five hundred has already been spent. She sent the remaining three hundred back home for Grandmother You to take care of.’

‘In that case,’ said Cousin Zhen, ‘you’d better go back with Yu Lu to ask her for it and let him have it. While you’re about it, you’ll be able to see if everything at home is all right. And of course give my regards to your aunts. Yu Lu, you’ll have to raise the rest of the money as best you can by borrowing.’

Jia Rong and Yu Lu promised to do his bidding, but just as they were about to withdraw Jia Lian walked into the room. Yu Lu stepped up to him smartly and dropped him a salute.

‘What’s happened?’ said Jia Lian.

Cousin Zhen proceeded to explain to him why Yu Lu was there. As he did so, it occurred to Jia Lian that this would be a good opportunity of going to the Ning-guo mansion and looking up Er-jie again.

‘It seems a pity to go straining one’s credit for so trifling a sum,’ he said. ‘I had a little windfall the other day that I haven’t made use of yet. Why don’t I let him have that to add to your three hundred and save him the trouble of borrowing?’

‘That will be splendid,’ said Cousin Zhen. ‘Perhaps you will authorize Rong to pick it up then, when he goes to collect the three hundred?’

‘I think it will be necessary to go for it myself,’ said Jia Lian hurriedly. ‘In any case I haven’t been home for some days. I really ought to drop in and pay my respects to Grandmother and Lady Wang and my parents. I shall be able to look in at your place too, Then, and make sure that your servants are behaving themselves. And pay my respects to your motherin4aw, of course.’

‘It means imposing on you once again,’ said Cousin Then, smiling. ‘I don’t know whether I should let you.’

‘For goodness’ sake!’ said Jia Lian. ‘One’s own cousin!’

‘Go with your uncle, then,’ Cousin Then instructed Jia Rong, ‘and when you see Lady Jia and the other ladies and Sir She to make your bow to them, remember to say that your mother and I send them our regards. And don’t forget to

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ask whether Lady Jia is quite better yet and whether or not she is still taking medicine.’

Having ‘yessir’-ed each one of these commands, Jia Rong followed his Uncle Lian outside. The two of them then took horse and, accompanied by Yu Lu and several pages, all on horseback, rode out towards the city. As Er-lie was very much on his mind, Jia Lian beguiled the journey by talking to his nephew about her as they rode along. He spoke approvingly of her good looks and gentle character. He remarked what perfect poise she had and what a soft and pleasing way of speaking. In fact, be concluded, everything about her excited one’s admiration and respect.

‘Everyone speaks so highly of your Aunt Feng, but to my mind she isn’t a patch on her.’

Jia Rong understood very well where this conversation was leading them.

‘If you love her so much, Uncle,’ he said, ‘why not let me he your matchmaker and arrange for you to have her as your Number Two?’

‘Is that a joke,’ said Jia Lian, ‘or are you in earnest?’

‘I’m being perfectly serious.’

Jia Lian laughed:
'It's certainly an attractive proposal. The only trouble is, I don't think your Aunt Feng would ever stand for it. And besides, your Grandmother You might not be willing. And haven't I heard somewhere that your Aunt Er is already engaged to someone?'
'None of these is really a problem,' said Jia Rong. 'Aunt Er and Aunt San, although they took his surname, were not really my Grandpa You's daughters. When Gran married my Grandpa You as his second wife, she brought them with her from a previous marriage. I've heard Gran say that when she was carrying Aunt Er, her first husband had an agreement with a friend of his called Zhang, who was a manager on one of the Imperial Farms and whose own wife was also pregnant at the time. They agreed that if the children their wives were carrying turned out to be a boy and a girl, they should be betrothed to each other. In that way Aunt Er was engaged to the Zhangs' boy from the moment she was born. Later on the

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Zhangs lost all their money in a lawsuit, and Gran lost her first husband and married my Grandpa You, and for ten or fifteen years now she hasn't heard a word from them. She often complains about the betrothal and says she wishes she could get it revoked; and Father is anxious to betroth Aunt Er to someone else. He's only waiting until he has found the right person, and then he means to find out where the Zhangs are, hand them a small sum of money, and persuade them to sign a deed of revocation. The Zhangs are so poor, they are hardly likely to refuse. In fact, when they've seen the kind of people we are, they probably won't dare. And whatever Father and Gran might have thought about Aunt Er becoming a Number Two in other circumstances, I'm sure they would have no objection in your case. The only difficulty as I see it is Aunt Feng.'
Jia Lian was so enraptured by the main part of what Jia Rong had been saying, that it is doubtful whether he heard those last words at all. For some moments he rode on in silence, a fatuous grin on his face. Meanwhile Jia Rong was thinking.
'I'll tell you what, Uncle,' he said presently: 'if you've got the nerve, there's one way of doing this that would be absolutely fool-proof. It would involve you in spending a bit of money though.'
'Never mind that, dear boy I' said Jia Lian eagerly. 'If you have a plan, just tell me what it is.'
'Don't say anything about this when we arrive,' said Jia Rong, 'but wait until I have had a chance to explain it all to Father and he can arrange it with my Gran. When it's all settled, buy a little house somewhere in the streets at the back of our mansion, furnish it, install one or two married couples to look after it, and then all you have to do is choose the day: you can marry Aunt Er then and nobody be any the wiser. Of course, you'd have to impress on the servants that they are not to let on about it; but provided *they* don't talk, there's no reason why Aunt Feng tucked away in the inner courtyards should ever hear about it. And by the time you've been living together for a year or two, you ought to be able to ride the storm out even if your secret is blown. You'd have to face an explosion from Sir She, of course; but you can tell him that you did it for the family, because Aunt Feng is unable to have a

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son. And as for Aunt Feng herself, when she sees that the rice is cooked and knows that it can't be uncooked, she'll have to put up with it. That only leaves the old lady to square, and you should be able to do that easily enough with a bit of coaxing.'

There is an old saying, 'Desire maketh the wise man a fool'. Jia Lian was so intoxicated by his desire for Er-jie that Jia Rong's idiotic plan struck him as unassailable. The fact that he was in mourning, the fact that a secret marriage of the kind he was contemplating was bigamous and illegal, the fact that he had an extremely strict father and an exceptionally jealous wife - all those things which ought to have given him pause were lightly brushed aside. Nor did it occur to him that Jia Rong's counsel was by no means disinterested. Jia Rong had designs upon Er-jie himself, to which the presence of his father, when they were all together in the same house; was an impediment. If Jia Lian married Er-jie, she would have to live outside, and there would be unlimited opportunities for larks with her whenever Jia Lian was away. Blind to all this, Jia Lian thanked Jia Rong profusely and promised him a suitable reward.

'If you can really arrange this for me, dear boy, I'll buy you a pair of the prettiest little girls who are to be had and make you a present of them!'

They were by now approaching the gates of Ning-guo House.

'You go in here and ask my Gran for the money to give to Yu Lu, Uncle. I'm going on to the other House to pay my respects to the old lady.'

Jia Lian smiled and nodded.
'When you see her, don't let on that I came here with you, will you?'

‘All right,’ said Jia Rong; then, leaning over, he added in a low voice in his uncle’s ear: ‘If you should happen to see Aunt Er today, don’t let impatience get the better of you! A scandal now will make it harder to arrange things later.’
‘Cheeky devil!’ said Jia Lian laughing. ‘Go on, be on your way now! I’ll be waiting for you here.
While Jia Rong went on to the Rong mansion alone, Jia

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Lian turned into the gateway of Ning-guo House. The menservants temporarily in charge there were waiting inside the gate to welcome him, with the other servants all lined up behind them. They clustered round him as he made his way up to the hall. There, for form’s sake, he asked them a few perfunctory questions before dismissing them and continuing on his way to the inner apartments.

As cousins and intimates having no secrets from one another, Cousin Zhen and Jia Lian had always felt free to come and go in each other’s apartments without formality, and so, when Jia Lian approached the main sitting-room of Cousin Zhen’s apartment, the old women at the door simply raised the portiere for him and let him go in unannounced.
Looking round him as he entered, Jia Lian saw only Er-jie and a couple of maids sewing together on the kang at the southern end of the room. The mother and the other sister were not in evidence. He went up and greeted her. In response to her smiling invitation to join her, he climbed up and sat with his back resting against the openwork partition along the eastern side of the kang, insisting that Er-jie should take the place of honour. After a few generalities, he asked her where Mrs You and San-jie were.
‘Just gone Out the back to see about something,’ said Er-jie. ‘They’ll be here again in a moment.’
The maids now went outside to fetch tea, leaving the two of them alone together. Jia Lian ogled Er-jie meaningfully, but she merely smiled, keeping her eyes demurely downwards, and pretended not to notice. At this stage, he judged; a physical advance would be premature. He noticed that as she sat there her hands were continuously playing with a length of silk handkerchief to which a tiny embroidered bag was attached. To fill in the embarrassed silence that was developing, he pretended to be feeling for something at his waist.
‘Oh, I’ve come Out without my betel! Give me some betel, my dear, if you’ve got any.’
‘I have got some,’ said Er-jie, ‘but it’s not for other people.’ Jia Lian laughed and made a movement towards her, as if he intended to snatch the handkerchief and its little pouch from her by force, whereupon Er-jie, rather than risk someone

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coming in and finding them in the midst of an unseemly tussle, threw it across to him with a little laugh. Jia Lian caught it in mid-air, emptied the contents into the palm of his hand, selected one single half-eaten nut which he popped into his mouth and began chewing, and stuffed all the rest back into the bag. He was just going to hand it back to her when the two maids came in again with the tea. Jia Lian took a cup from one of them and began sipping it. While the maids were not looking, he contrived to unfasten a Han jade girdle pendant in the form of nine tiny interlocking dragons that he wore attached to his belt, tie it onto the handkerchief and toss it back for Er-jie to catch. But Er-jie pretended not to have noticed. She allowed the handkerchief with the two small objects attached to it to fail beside her on the kang and went on calmly sipping her tea.

Just then there was a rattle of the portiere and old Mrs You and San-jie came into the room from the back, attended by two little maids. Jia Lian signalled with his eyes to Er-jie that she should pick the handkerchief up, but Er-jie continued to ignore him. In somewhat of a panic by now and wondering what Er-jie could be at, he rose to his feet arid advanced to meet San-jie and the old lady. When, after exchanging courtesies with them, he glanced back behind him, Er-jie was standing unconcernedly in the same place, with the same inscrutable smile on her face; but the handkerchief had vanished. He breathed a sigh of relief.

When they were all seated and a few pleasantries had been exchanged between them, Jia Lian remembered the business on which he was supposed to have come.

‘Zhen’s wife says that she sent a packet of silver to you the other day to look after for her. It’s wanted now to pay some bills with, so Zhen has sent me to ask you for it and also to find out if everything at home is all right.’

Mrs You at once told Er-jie to take the key of the chest and fetch the money for her.

‘I’m also glad of the opportunity my errand gives me of offering you my respects, ma’am, and of seeing the young ladies again,’ Jia Lian continued after Er-jie had gone. ‘I must say, you are looking extremely well. But I am sorry the young

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ladies should have to put up with the inconvenience of moving into a strange house.'

'Tut, for one's own kin!' said Mrs You, smiling. 'You are too polite, Mr Lian! It's of no consequence where we stay: one bed is as good as another. To tell you the truth, things have been very difficult for us since Mr You passed away. If it hadn't been for the help given us by my daughter's husband, I really don't know how we should have managed. To look after the house for him in his time of trouble is the very least we can do in return. It can certainly not be spoken of as an inconvenience.'

Er-jie had now returned with the silver and handed it to her mother; her mother handed it to Jia Lian; and Jia Lian ordered one of the maids to call in one of the old women from outside, whom he then instructed to take it to Yu Lu and tell him to wait for him in the front.

While the old woman was going off with the money, Jia Rong's voice could be heard outside in the courtyard and a few moments later he appeared. He greeted his grandmother and two aunts before turning with a smile to Jia Lian:

'Sir She has been asking about you, Uncle. He says there's something he wants you to do for him. He was going to send someone to fetch you from the temple, but I told him you were already on your way into the city. He told me that if I ran into you on my way back, I was to tell you to hurry.'

Jia Lian hastily rose to go, but delayed to hear something that Jia Rong was saying to Mrs You.

'You know the other day I was telling you that Father has found a husband for Aunt Er, Gran. In looks and build he has quite a strong resemblance to Uncle Lian. Does that please you?'

Since he was pointing a finger at Jia Lian and simultaneously making a face at Er-jie while he said this, the question appeared to be meant as much for Er-jie as for her mother. If so, Er-jie was too embarrassed to answer. Not so her sister, however.

'Little monster!' San-jie shouted, half angrily and half in jest. 'Keep your dirty little mouth shut - unless you want me to come over and shut it for you!'

Jia Rong retreated, laughing, from the room; and Jia

Lian, taking a laughing farewell of the old lady and her daughters, went out after him, He stopped in the hall again on his way out to admonish the servants: not to gamble, not to drink, and so forth. Then, after a private aside with Jia Rong in which he urged him to return with all speed to the temple and speak about a *certain matter* to his father, he went with Yu Lu to the other mansion and gave him the balance of the amount owing. Having dispatched Yu Lu, he went in to see what his father wanted, and after that to Grandmother Jia's apartment to pay his respects. But these are formalities with which we need not concern ourselves.

We return, then, to the Ning-guo mansion, where Jia Rong, concluding, when he saw Yu Lu go off with Jia Lian, that there was nothing more for him to do, went back to the inner apartments for further badinage with his young aunts before setting off once more for the temple. It was evening when he arrived there and reported back to his father.

'Yu Lu got the money all right. And Lady Jia is now completely recovered. She is no longer taking medicine.'

He availed himself of the opportunity to tell his father about Jia Lian: how, on the journey into town, he had expressed a desire to take Er-jie as his Number Two and how he proposed to set her up in a separate establishment, keeping Xi-feng in ignorance of the marriage.

'His sole reason for taking a Number Two,' Jia Rong explained, 'is that he wants a son. And the reason he particularly wants Aunt Er is because he feels it would be better to keep things in the family and have someone he knows, than risk taking some unknown person from outside. He was very insistent that I should speak to you about this.'

He omitted to mention that he was the author of this plan. Cousin Zhen, after reflecting on it, seemed well disposed. 'Actually, it's not a bad idea. I wonder whether your Aunt Er would be willing, though. You'd better go in again tomorrow and have a word with your Grandmother You. Tell her to talk to your Aunt Er about it and see if she accepts. If she does, we can go ahead and fix it up properly.'

After a good deal more advice to Jia Rong on how he was to conduct himself, Cousin Zhen went inside to see You-shi and

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told her about the plan. You-shi could see at once that it would not work and did her best to dissuade him; but Cousin Zben's mind was made up; and in the end, since she was accustomed to giving in to him, and since Er-jie was in any case only a step-sister, for whom therefore she felt only limited responsibility, she allowed the menfolk to go ahead and washed her hands of the whole affair.

Jia Rong went into town next morning and told his grandmother what his father had told him to say. He also added a good deal of his own. He told her what a capital person Jia Lian was; how Xi-feng was ill and not expected to get better; how Jia Lian was planning to buy a house outside and install Er-jie in it temporarily, but how in a year or two, as soon as Xi-feng was dead, he would move her inside and make her his Number One. He went on to tell her about the gifts Cousin Zhen would give for the betrothal and of the wedding presents that Jia Lian was planning for his bride; how Jia Lian was prepared to look after Mrs You in her old age; and how in due course he would see San-jie provided with a husband. The Liang dynasty preacher on whom the heavens rained down flowers could not have spoken with greater eloquence. Mrs You could hardly fail to agree, particularly in view of the fact that she depended on Cousin Zhen for her livelihood and that it was he who was sponsoring the marriage. And Jia Lian was such a fine young gentleman - infinitely superior to that Zhang boy. She would go to Er-jie at once and talk it over with her.

You Er-jie was a highly impressionable young woman. Already, in the past, she had compromised herself with her sister's husband. And she had always resented the arbitrary betrothal to Zhang Hua (as the Zhangs' boy was called) which seemed to condemn her to a lifetime of poverty. If Jia Lian loved her and her brother-in-law was prepared to give her away, what possible objection could she have to the marriage? Her consent was given with a nod, conveyed at once to Jia Rong by her mother, and in due course reported to Cousin Zhen.

Next day Cousin Zhen invited Jia Lian to the temple to hear from his own lips that Mrs You had consented. Jia Lian, de-

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lighted that the matter had been settled with so little trouble, at once began discussing what to do. Agents had to be engaged to look round for a suitable house, jewellery for Er-jie's trousseau had to be ordered, and furnishings had to be purchased for the house. Within a few days all this had been done. A twenty-frame house in Little Flower Lane about two thirds of a mile north of Two Dukes Street had been bought, furnished throughout, and two little maids purchased to go with it.

Jia Lian was at first uncertain what to do about older servants. If he used servants from his own household, their transfer was sure to be detected; on the other hand a married couple purchased from outside would be strangers, and therefore of uncertain loyalty and impossible to trust. Suddenly he remembered Bao Er, whose unfortunate wife had hanged herself after being attacked by Xi-feng in a fit of jealous rage. At the time Jia Lian had given him some money and promised him a new wife. The wife he had eventually chosen for him was none other than the Mattress, widowed since the drunken cook 'Droopy' Duo had finally drunk himself to death. Bao Er had had prior experience of her charms and knew that he was getting a good bargain; and the Mattress for her part was glad to be married to someone who (thanks to Jia Lian's subvention) could afford to be free with his money. This couple, united in their loyalty to Jia Lian and dislike of Xi-feng, seemed an ideal choice for the new establishment and were to their immense satisfaction installed in it, along with the newly-purchased maids, to be at Er-jie's disposal when she arrived.

There remained only the matter of Zhang Hua to be dealt with. It was Zhang Hua's grandfather who had originally held the managerial post on one of the Imperial Farms. His father simply inherited the post when the old man died. While holding it, he had made the arrangement with Mrs You's first husband, who was his good friend, as a result of which Zhang Hua and Er-jie were engaged to each other from their earliest infancy. Some time after that he lost all his possessions in a lawsuit and the family were reduced to penury so dire that even food and clothing were a problem, and taking on a new daughter-in4aw was, for the time being, wholly out of the

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question. Then Er-jie's mother had remarried, and for fourteen years or more they had been completely out of touch. Their whereabouts were eventually traced, however, and Zhang Hua's father summoned to Ning-guo House and induced to sign a deed of revocation releasing Er-jie from her betrothal. He did not want to sign it,

but was too intimidated by Cousin Zhen's air of affluence and authority to object. After he had signed, Mrs You handed him twenty taels, and that was that.

Everything had now been taken care of. All that remained was for Jia Lian to name the day. The calendar was consulted and the third of the sixth month, which was just beginning, was found to be the earliest auspicious day. On that day, it was decided, Er-jie should be received as a bride in her new home.

But for that event you must await the following chapter.

CHAPTER 65

Jia Lian's second marriage is
celebrated in secret
And the future marriage of San-jie
becomes a matter of speculation

By the second day of the month, the arrangements jointly agreed on by Jia Lian, Cousin Zhen and *Jia* Rong had been completed and Mrs You and San-jie moved into the new house. A brief inspection of it satisfied Mrs You that, if not quite what Jia Rong had led her to expect, it was at least excellently furnished, and it could be said that both she and San-jie were reasonably happy about the move. Bao Er and his wife could not do enough for them. It was 'yes, milady', 'no, milady' whenever they were talking to Mrs You; and San-jie, for the first time in her life, found herself being addressed as 'Miss You', or sometimes even as 'madam'.

In the last watch of that same night, only an hour or two before the dawning of the third, Er-jie, seated in a plain chair without bridal trimmings, was carried to her new home. The incense and paper-offerings for the ceremony, the wedding-feast and marriage-bed had all been made ready long before she arrived. Jia Lian, also in a small, plain carrying-chair, arrived shortly afterwards. The bride and groom made their prostrations to Heaven and Earth, the paper offerings were set fire to, and Mrs You conducted her heavily-veiled daughter into the marriage-chamber, gratified to observe the transformation wrought by a completely new and expensive-looking outfit of clothes and jewellery.

The phoenix-gambollings of the nuptial couch and the mutual delight and cherishing which they engendered are here passed over. Suffice it to say that the more Jia Lian saw of Er-jie, the more he loved her, until the desire to make some gesture expressive of his feelings became overwhelming. All he could think of was to behave in every way as if Er-jie was

his only wife and Xi-feng did not exist. He ordered Bao Er and his wife to call her 'Mrs Lian' and always referred to her himself in that way when he was speaking to them. When he went back to Xi-feng, as from time to time he was obliged to, he would tell her that he had been doing something at the Ning-guo mansion; and Xi-feng, knowing how well her husband got on with Cousin Zhen and how frequently he was consulted by him, suspected nothing. In spite of their numbers, few of the Rong-guo domestics concerned themselves much with Jia Lian's activities, and even the few who had the time and curiosity to nose out what he had been up to were more anxious to win favours by playing up to him than to gamble on the uncertain advantages of giving away his secret. Everything seemed to be working out very smoothly and Jia Lian felt immensely grateful to Cousin Zhen for having made it all possible.

The allowance Jia Lian made to cover the day-to-day expenses of his little household was fifteen taels a month. On days when he was unable to come, Mrs You and her two daughters dined together. On days when he was there, he and Er-jie would dine together and Mrs You and San-jie would eat separately in their own room. Besides paying Er-jie the allowance, Jia Lian handed over all his private savings to her to look alter for him. He told her everything about Xi-feng, down to the most intimate bedroom particulars, and promised her that as soon as Xi-feng died, she should move into the mansion and live there openly as his wife. It cannot be said that Er-jie found any of this displeasing. In the mean-time the little household was managing very comfortably.

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Two months passed quickly by. One evening, as Cousin Zhen was returning from a day of Buddhist ceremonies at the Temple of the Iron Threshold, he bethought him that it was some considerable time since he had enjoyed the company of the two You sisters and decided to pay them a visit. First, though, he sent a boy to the new house to find out if Jia Lian was there. Delighted when the boy brought back word that he was not, he ordered most of the servants to return to Ning-

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guo House without him, keeping only his two most trusted pages to accompany him on foot to the Yous' house. They did this walking one on either side of his horse's head and holding on to his bridle.
It was already lighting-up time when they got there, but the courtyard gate was still open. Their arrival was so quiet and discreet that they managed to get inside it unobserved. The pages tied the horse up in the stable and took themselves off to the servants' quarters to await further orders, while Cousin Zhen entered the living-room alone. He found San-jie and her mother sitting there. The lamp had just been lit. Shortly after he had finished exchanging greetings with them, Er-jie herself appeared and made him welcome. Tea was served. Cousin Zhen smiled over his cup at her as he sipped his tea.
'Well, do you think I'd make a good marriage-broker? If the husband I picked for you is no good, I doubt I could find you a better! Your sister will be coming to see you shortly, by the bye, and bringing you a present.'
Er-jie had already given orders for food and wine to be brought and for the courtyard gate to be barred. Since their visitor was a member of the family, it seemed reasonable, that the usual restraints should be relaxed. Presently Bao Er came in with some things and took the opportunity of offering his respects to Cousin Zhen.
'You're a good fellow, Bao,' said Cousin Zhen affably. 'I'm sure that's why Mr Lian chose you for this job. No doubt there will be even more important work for you in the future. So don't go drinking outside and getting yourself into trouble, will you? If you do as I tell you, I promise to make it worth your while. And let me know if there's anything you want here. Mr Lian is a busy man, and not all the people in his household are to be trusted. It's better to ask me. He and I are not only cousins, you know; we are- also very good friends.'
'Yes, sir. I shall do my best to give satisfaction, sir,' said Bao Er. 'I realize it would be more than my life is worth to get into any trouble.'
Cousin Zhen smiled and nodded.

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'Good. As long as you know.'
For some minutes the four of them sat drinking together; but Er-jie knew that it was not for a family evening that Cousin Zhen had come and soon found an excuse for getting herself and her mother out of the way. She told him that she had to go to the other side of the house for something and was afraid to do so on her own. As soon as she and Mrs You were out of the room, Cousin Zhen drew up closer to San-jie. His behaviour became so familiar that the two maids in attendance grew embarrassed and slipped off to the kitchen. They were content that Cousin Zhen and San-jie should enjoy themselves in any way they chose, provided that they did not have to stay and watch.
Cousin Zhen's two pages were all this time drinking with Bao Er in the kitchen, while the Mattress stood at the stove with her back to them. When the two maids burst in and began laughing and joking with the boys and asking to be given some wine, Bao Er was far from pleased.
'What are you girls doing here? You ought to be in the sitting-room. Suppose they want service in there? There'll be trouble.'
His wife turned round wrathfully from the stove.
'Silly old fool! Why don't you get your nose back into your winecup? The sooner you're flat on your back snoring and your little winkle tucked up out of harm's way, the better it'll be for all of us! What's it to do with *you* whether they want service in there or not? I'm here to see to all that. If there's any rain falling it--won't fall on *your* head. So what are you worrying about?'
Bao Er was well aware that it was largely to his wife that he owed his favourable position with Jia Lian. He did little himself these days but draw his pay and drink his wine; but so exemplary was the Mattress's service of Er-jie, that although Jia Lian knew of Bao Er's failings, he had so far refrained from taking him to task about them out of consideration for her. Bao Er's awareness of this kept him in obedient subjection to her. And so, when he heard himself addressed by her in this way, he merely drank a few more cups in silence and then took himself quietly off to bed.

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The Mattress had a few drinks herself now with the pages and the two girls, anxious to make herself as agreeable as possible so that the pages would give a good report of her to Cousin Zhen. But just as this little party in the kitchen was beginning to warm up, it was interrupted by a sudden knocking at the gate. The Mattress hurried out and opened it as Jia Lian was dismounting from his horse. In answer to his question whether there was anything to report, she whispered into his ear that Mr Zhen had come and was at this very moment in the guest-room in the west courtyard. Jia Lian went straight to his own room, where he found Er-jie sitting with her mother. The two women seemed somewhat flustered by his arrival, but he pretended not to notice.
'Bring us some wine,' he told the Mattress. 'I think I shall have a cup or two and then go to bed. I feel rather tired tonight.'

At once Er-jie was all over him, taking his coat, fetching him tea, asking him about his day - in short, showering on him all those little wifely attentions which so enchanted him. Presently the Mattress reappeared with their wine. Old Mrs You said that she did not want any and went off to bed. The two of them sat down together to drink it. One of the two maids, who had now been persuaded to resume their duties, came over from the kitchen to wait on them.
Meanwhile Jia Lian's trusty servant Rich - the only attendant he had brought with him on this visit - had been tying his master's horse up in the stable. Finding another horse there already, he was able on closer inspection to identify it and to deduce what the Mattress by her whispering had attempted to conceal from him: viz., that Cousin zhen was somewhere on the premises. Sure enough, on going to the kitchen when he had finished tying up the horse, he found two of Cousin Zhen's pages, Happy and Lively, sitting there drinking. They, too, when they saw him enter, realized that both their masters must be present; but neither party was going to admit what each knew the other one must know.
'We couldn't keep up with the master,' said Happy and Lively, 'and it was getting too dark to go home, so we came here to beg a night's shelter.'

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'There's plenty of room here for you to sleep,' said Rich expansively. 'Make yourselves at home. Actually *I* came here to bring the mistress her monthly allowance. Now that I've given it to her, I think *I* shall spend the night here as well.'
'Come and have a drink then,' said Happy. 'We've had a lot to drink already.'
Rich sat down and poured himself some wine; but before he could drink any, there was a sound of neighing and trampling from the stable and he and Lively had to run out and shout at the horses. The two animals sharing the same manger had taken a dislike to each other and started kicking. It was only after a great deal of shouting and whoaing that the pages succeeded in quieting them and tying them up on separate sides of the stable.
While they were doing this, Happy was able to drink several more cups of wine, and by the time they got back into the kitchen, he was already glassy-eyed. The Mattress was evidently waiting for an opportunity to retire.
'Well, boys,' she said to them as they entered, 'I'll leave you to it then. I've made you a pot of tea, so you can help yourselves. I'm going off to bed.'
The boys were reluctant to let her go, and there was a good deal of kissing and fondling and noisy ribaldry before she finally succeeded in extricating herself. She closed the door behind her as she went, and Rich and Lively proceeded to bar it on the inside, preparatory to going to bed. When they went back to look at the kang, however, they found Happy sprawled out in the middle of it, already fast asleep.
'Come on, there's a good chap, get up and lie down again properly I' they said, shaking him. 'Don't be so selfish! Where are *we* supposed to
'What about a bit of bum-cake?' mumbled Happy, momentarily returning to consciousness. 'Turn and turn about. Fair shares for all.'
The others, seeing that he was too drunk to reason with, blew the lamp out and settled themselves on either side of him as best they could.
The commotion in the stable had caused Er-jie's apprehensiveness to return, but by forcing herself to keep up a flow

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of chatter, she succeeded in distracting Jia Lian's attention away from it. So successful was she that, after a few more drinks, he began to grow amorous and, having first sent the girl off with the dirty things, proposed that they should bar the door for the night and begin undressing. Er-jie was beautiful at any time, but in only a **crimson** shift, with her fashionable coiffure shaken out into billowing black clouds and her face all soft and glowing with desire, she possessed an extra dimension of beauty that was not revealed in the daytime. He hugged her to him with a delighted laugh.
'They're always telling me how perfect that termagant wife of mine is,' he said, 'but the way you look tonight, she's not fit to carry your shoes!'
'I may have looks, but I've got no class,' said Et-jie. 'Without class, one might just as well not be good-looking.'
'Why do you say that?' said Jia Lian. 'I don't understand.'
'You all treat me as if I were a fool,' said Er-jie tearfully. 'You think that I know nothing -'
'No!'
'- but though we've only been married two months – '
'I *know* you're not a fool!' he insisted.
'though we've only been together for so short a time,' she continued, 'I already feel that I'm yours completely and for ever, in this life or any life to come. Because you are my husband, I shall always look up to you and never, never deceive you. *My* future is assured. But what is to become of my sister? We can't let things go on the way they are at present. We must think of some permanent solution for her.'

Jia Lian laughed reassuringly.
‘Look, I’m not a jealous man. I know about your past and it doesn’t bother me. You really mustn’t worry. I realize that now we are married you must feel awkward about Cousin Zhen being here, but surely the solution would be for Cousin Zhen and your sister to have a formal union and after that we can forget our inhibitions and make it a foursome. What do you say to that?’
Er-jie wiped her eyes.
‘It’s very nice of you to suggest it, but I don’t know what the other two would think of your idea. For one thing, my

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sister is such a funny girl. And for another, I don’t know whether your cousin would like having everything dragged Out into the open.’

‘It’ll be all right,’ said Jia Lian, ‘you see! I’ll go over and have it out with him now. There’s no time like the present. It’s only a question of breaking the ice.’
He strode off, the bolder for being a little drunk, to the courtyard on the western side of the compound. Light was streaming through the sitting-room window. He pushed the door open and walked in.
‘Where’s the big chief, then?’ he cried. ‘Cousin, I’ve come to pay you my respects!’
Speechless with embarrassment, Cousin Zhen rose to his feet and motioned him dumbly to a seat.
‘What’s this ?’ said Jia Lian, noting his embarrassment. ‘After we’ve always been such good friends, and after all you’ve done for me - because if I cut myself into a million pieces, I still couldn’t begin to show you how grateful I am -you’re not, surely, going to start feeling uneasy on *my* account? My dear coz, from this day on I Want you to carry on exactly as you used to in the past. Otherwise I shall give up any idea of getting myself an heir and stop coming here altogether!’
He tried to kneel down at this point, but Cousin Zhen, who was becoming quite frantic with embarrassment, quickly reached out to stop him.
‘All right, Lian,’ he said, ‘all right. Whatever you say, coz. I’ll be guided by you.’
‘Come on, let’s have some more wine!’ Jia Lian said to the servant-girl. ‘I’m going to drink with my dear cousin.’ He turned to San-jie with a leer. ‘Why don’t you and my dear cousin share a cup? You and Zhen drink a cup together and I’ll drink a cup to your future happiness. To Zhen and San-jie!’
San-jie leaped to her feet and, pointing her finger at Jia Lian from where she stood on the kang, fixed him with a withering look of contempt.
‘Don’t try the talking horse on me, my friend! If you two want to drink, I’ll watch you drink. But count me out of it.

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People who work shadow-puppets should be careful not to break the screen. You surely can’t be so stupid as to imagine that we haven’t seen by now how things really stand in your household? If you and your cousin thought that by spending a few taels of your stinking money you could buy my sister and me for your whores, you were very much mistaken. You see, I know all about your old woman and how scared you are of her. I know that it’s because of her that when you married my sister you had to smuggle her out here like a man who’s stolen a gong and doesn’t dare to play on it. Well, I should like to meet this Feng lady and find out just how many heads and arms she’s got. If we can reach a satisfactory agreement, well and good; but if there’s the slightest difficulty, I’m perfectly prepared to take her on and fight it out with her single-handed. But before I do that, I promise to have the liver and lights out of you two, or my name’s not “San-jie”! - You said you wanted a drink, didn’t you? All right, I’ll drink with you.’

She picked up the wine-kettle and pouted out a cupful of wine; then, having drunk half of it herself, she threw an arm round Jia Lian’s neck and pressed the winecup to his lips.
Jia Lian was shocked by this onslaught into instant soberness; and Cousin Zhen, ill-prepared for such strident shrewishness by what had passed earlier in the evening, was almost equally taken aback. The two of them, for all their boasted experience, found themselves reduced to a condition of tongue-tied helplessness by this single unmarried girl.
But San-jie had not finished with them yet.
‘Why don’t you ask my sister to join us?’ she asked. ‘If we’re going to have fun, let’s all have fun together. “Home is handiest” as the proverb says. There are no outsiders here. We’re all in the family. Come one, come all!’
Cousin Zhen was by now looking for an opportunity to leave, but San-jie was careful to give him none. He had not suspected that she could be like this and deeply regretted having come; but he could not simply walk out without giving offence to Jia Lian.
Out of deliberate disregard for appearances she had taken off her hair-ornaments and outer clothes, and from time to

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time as she spoke, the animated gestures with which her words were accompanied caused the imperfectly-fastened **crimson** shift she was wearing to gape open, revealing glimpses of leek--**green** breast-binder and snow-white flesh beneath; the **red** shoes that peeped out below her **green** drawers were all the time tap-tapping or coming together in a manner that was anything but ladylike, and her earrings bobbed to and fro like little swings. To her

brow's dusky crown and lips incarnadine

the lamplight lent an added softness and brightness; and the wine she had drunk gave her eyes, which were at all times sparkling and vivacious, an even more irresistible allure. The two men were spellbound, and yet at the same time repelled. Her looks and gestures were all that inflamed concupiscence could desire; but her words and the very frankness of a provocation too brazen to be seductive kept them at bay.

And a poor pair they made of it in a situation where something other than carnal satisfaction was required of them Not only was there none of that lively repartee that might have been expected of men who prided themselves on their gallantry; they could not produce so much as a single amusing remark between them and sat there, as the effortless flow of talk continued to pour out of her, fascinated but unresponding. Sometimes she abused them, called them names, said the most outrageous things to them. It was as though the roles had been reversed - as though she was the man and they were a pair of poor, simpering playthings whose services she had paid for. And when she had had enough of playing with them, she dismissed them ignominiously, bolted the door alter them, and went to bed.

From that time onwards, whenever one of the servants did some small thing to displease her, she would launch into loud abuse of Cousin Zhen, Jia Lian and Jia Rong, denouncing all three of them as swindlers, deceivers and oppressors of the widow and the orphan.

Cousin Zhen, when he finally got back after that visit, was chary of exposing himself again. Sometimes when San-jie felt in the mood, she would send one of the boys round to

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summon him and he would visit her then gladly enough, for he still had some small hope of winning her; but he was careful to behave himself when he did, and to defer in everything to her wishes.

San-jie was a very peculiar young woman. She took a perverse pleasure in enhancing her natural beauty by affecting a striking style of dress and by adopting every conceivable kind of outrageously seductive attitude. The effect was that every male who encountered her was smitten - not only the susceptible ones like Jia Lian and Cousin Zhen, but those made of sterner stuff as well; yet all of them, after only a few minutes in her company, felt their ardour extinguished and their advances repelled by the reckless, forthright, almost insolent way in which she received them.

When her mother and sister took her to task for her cavalier treatment of the two cousins, she told Er-jie she was 'stupid'.

'Why should that pair of precious rascals be allowed to ruin girls like us that are worth a million of them and get away with it?' she said. 'They shan't do so if *I* can help it. Besides, that wife of Lian's is a very dangerous woman. We're all right for the time being because she hasn't found out yet about your marriage; but she will do one of these days, and when that time comes she's not going to sit still and do nothing. There's sure to be a most terrible row, and who knows which of us will come out of it alive? It's only fair that they should be made to jump a bit now. If we're going to end up with a bad name anyway, let's at least get what we can out of them while we've got the chance!'

Her mother and sister, seeing that it was useless to argue with her, left her alone.

San-jie certainly put her precept into practice. Her demands for special kinds of food, for clothing, for jewellery became daily more extravagant and capricious. Given a silver ornament she would express a desire for a gold one. If she had something with pearls in it, she would like something with gems in it as well. While she was eating the fatted goose, her mind was already contemplating the slaughter of the duck. And woe betide the cook if anything was not quite to her taste! Over would go dishes, table and all! Or, if a newly-

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made garment displeased her, no matter how expensive the material, she would quickly reduce it to ribbons, using a pair of scissors to aid the process and uttering a fresh malediction at every tear. Cousin Zhen, who, having some time previously exhausted the possibilities with Er-jie and grown somewhat tired of her, had willingly yielded her up to Jia Lian and transferred his attentions to her sister, now found that San-jie, far from proving the complaisant mistress he had hoped for, was actually costing him a great deal of money - money, moreover, on which there seemed little prospect of a return.

Nowadays when Jia Lian came he spent the whole of his time there with Er-jie and scarcely dared venture from her room. Because of San-jie he too was beginning to regret the situation into which he had got himself.

On the other hand Er-jie was so loving and so devoted to him; he found her so sympathetic. In her gentleness, in the wifely submissiveness with which she insisted on discussing everything with him before she would make any decision, she was ten times better than Xi-feng. And in respect of looks, voice and deportment she was at least five times better.

True, she was a fallen woman; and though she had repented, neither her reform nor any other excellence could bring back her virtue. But that was what *she* said. Was it not Jia Lian himself who repudiated it?

'Everybody makes mistakes,' he would say. 'As long as you know that you were wrong and don't do it again, that's all that matters.'

He refused to talk about the unchasteness of her past: her present goodness was enough for him.

And so, his doubts forgotten, he would cleave to her more passionately than ever. They were of one heart, one mind. He swore they should live and die together. Xi-feng and Patience were banished totally from his thoughts.

Inevitably these pillow-sessions would end with Er-jie urging Jia Lian to do something about her sister.

'Why don't you talk it over with Zhen and think of someone you both know of who can marry her?' she said on the last of these occasions. 'She can't stay here like this indefinitely. Sooner or later there will be trouble.'

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'I did talk to Zhen about it the other day,' said Jia Lian, 'but he couldn't give up the idea of keeping her for himself. I said to him, "That piece of meat is too hot for chaps like us, Zhen. The rose is a very pretty flower, but you can get some nasty jabs from its spines. You'll never hold a girl like that down. Much better find a husband for her and get her *off* your hands." But he wouldn't say "yes" and he wouldn't say "no": he just hummed and hawed for a bit and left it at that. So what can I do?'

'Don't worry,' said Er-jie. 'We'll speak to San-jie herself about it tomorrow. If we can persuade her to agree in principle to a betrothal, it can be left to her to have it out with Cousin Zhen herself. Once she has convinced him that he has nothing to hope for, he will *have* to do something about finding her a husband.'

Next day Er-jie spent the morning preparing a little party for the four of them, and Jia Lian, instead of going off as he usually did, deliberately stayed indoors. At about noon Er-jie invited her sister over and, when she arrived, seated her next to their mother in the place of honour. San-jie knew perfectly well what the subject of this meeting was to be and, as the wine was going round for the third time, before her sister had had a chance to broach it, she burst into tears and proceeded to do so herself.

'I'm sure the only reason you have invited me here today, sister, is to give me a lecture, but I'm not stupid and I don't need to be nagged at as if I were a child. We all know what happened in the past, and there is no point in dragging it up now. The important thing is that as you are comfortably settled and Mamma's future is now assured, it's time to start thinking about how *I* am to be disposed of. However, this matrimony business is no children's game: it's a girl's whole lifetime to the day she dies that is decided by it. In the past, because we were so vulnerable and one could never be sure what designs men might have on one, I deliberately acted in a shameless manner in order to keep them at bay. Now I am willing to put all that behind me and turn myself into a good and obedient wife. On one condition, though: the man I marry has got to he somebody I know about and somebody

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who is to my liking. If I leave the choice to you, I am sure you will do your best to find someone rich and well-placed and good-looking, but if it is someone I cannot give my heart to, I shall feel that the whole of my life has been wasted.'

Jia Lian smiled reassuringly.

'That's easy. We leave the choice entirely to you. Just name the man and we will take care of the expenses. Your mother will have nothing to worry about.'

'I don't need to name him,' said San-jie. 'Er-jie has known about him all along.'

'Who is it?' Jia Lian asked, turning to Er-jie; but Er-jie could not for the moment think who her sister had in mind.

'I know who it is!' Jia Lian clapped his hands delightedly, suddenly convinced that he had thought of the right answer. 'And a very good choice tool 'he added.

'Who?' said Er-jie.

'No one else could ever be good enough for her. It has to be Bao-yu.'

Er-jie and Mrs You felt sure that he was right, but San-jie herself repudiated the suggestion indignantly.

'I suppose you think that if we were ten sisters instead of only three, every one of us would have to marry a Jia. There *are* other males in the world besides the ones in your family, you know.'

The other three were nonplussed. If it was not Bao-yu that she had in mind, then who could it be?

'Don't just look under your noses,' said San-jie. 'Try casting your mind back five years, sister.'

But at that point Joker arrived, one of Jia Lian's most trusted pages and sharer of his secrets.

‘Sir She has been asking for you, sir,’ said Joker. ‘I told him that you’d gone off to Sir Wang’s and then hurried here as quickly as I could to let you know.’

‘Were they asking about me at home yesterday?’ Jia Lian sounded a trifle concerned.

‘I told the mistress that you were at the family temple discussing arrangements for the Hundred Days with Mr Zhen and thought you might not be able to get back.’

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Jia Lian called for his horse to be led out and set off immediately, with Rich in attendance. Joker was left behind at the disposal of the women. Er-jie had two plates of food and a large cup of wine set down on the edge of the kang beside him and invited him to eat and drink standing, while she asked him a few questions. In fact she asked him a great many. How old was Xi-feng? In what way was she so awful? How old was Grandmother Jia? How many girls were there? And so on. Joker, smiling broadly, proceeded, between large sips of wine, to give the old lady and her two daughters a detailed expose of the Rong mansion and its inhabitants.

‘I’m one of the boys from the inner gate,’ he told them. ‘I belong to one of two groups of four. We work there by shifts. One group goes on duty as the other one comes off. Of us eight, some, like me, are in the master’s confidence, some are in the mistress’s. Those of us who are in the master’s confidence daren’t say a word to upset the mistress’s boys; but she can say or do whatever she likes to us. You want to know what she’s like? A cruel heart and a sharp tongue, that about sums her up. The master’s no softy, but he can do nothing with her. There’s a Miss Patience working for her though. She’s very nice. Though she’s so well in with the mistress, she’ll often do you a kindness behind her back. When one of us boys is in trouble, the mistress will be down on us like a ton of bricks, but if we can get Patience to put in a word for us, we know we shall be all right. Everyone hates the mistress. The only exceptions are Her Old Ladyship and Her Ladyship. The others pretend to like her, because they’re afraid. She knows she hasn’t got any rivals and she always takes very good care to keep both Their Ladyships happy, so consequently whatever she says goes, nobody else dares stand up to her. She’s a great one for saving. She must have saved a mountain of money by now. That’s why Their Ladyships are always saying what a good manager she is. They don’t realize how much we servants have to suffer so that she can take the credit. Whenever anything good happens, you can be sure that she’ll get in with the news first, before anyone else does, so that she can reap the benefit. But when things go wrong or she’s made a slip herself, she’ll very quickly step

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aside and fasten the blame for it on someone else. She’ll even fan the flames up and make it hotter for that other person once she’s safely out of it herself. Even her mother-in-law can’t stand her. “The magpie looking for a bigger nest who set up house with the crow” she calls her. She says she’s no business meddling with the affairs of our household when she ought to be looking after her own. She says if it weren’t for Her Old Ladyship, she’d have ordered her back long ago and made her stay where she belongs.’

Er-jie laughed.

‘If you say things like this behind her back, what must you say behind *Mine?* In my case there are even more things to criticize!’

Joker fell on his knees, protesting.

‘If I ever said a word against you, madam, I should deserve to be struck by lightning! It would have been a great blessing for all of us if the master had married you first instead of the mistress. I know there would have been fewer beatings and cursings for us boys and we shouldn’t have had to go around the way we do in fear and trembling all the time. There isn’t a boy among us who isn’t every day and everywhere singing your praises and saying what a kind and considerate lady you are. We are planing to ask the master to let us stay here and serve you all the time.’

‘Get up, get up!’ said Er-jie, laughing. ‘Little impertinence! I was only joking; how easily you are scared! I’m sure I don’t know what you should want to come here for. *I* am thinking of going to see your mistress.’

Joker waved his hand in. vigorous disapproval.

‘Don’t do that, madam, whatever you do! It would be much better if you never set eyes on her as long as you live. She’s “soft of tongue and hard of heart”, “two faces and three knives”, she’ll “give you a smile and trip you up the while”, she’s “a welcoming fire when you see her, but a stab in the back when it’s dark” - all those things and more. I don’t think even Miss You here could get the better of her in an argument, so I’m sure a quiet, gentle lady like you would be no match for her.’

Er-jie smiled.

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'If I behave correctly towards her, I don't see why she should do me any harm.'
'Listen, madam,' said Joker. 'I'm not saying this to you because I've had too much to drink, but when she sees that you are both prettier and more popular than she is, she's not going to let matters rest They call jealous people "vinegar bottles", don't they? Well, she's not just a bottle-full of vinegar; she's a storage-jar - a whole cistern-full of it! The master's only got to rest his eyes on one of the maids, and she'll find occasion to have that poor girl beaten until she looks like a boiled sheep's head. Miss Patience is supposed to be his chamber-wife, but I doubt she lets him sleep with her more than once in a year. And even then she'll go on and on about it afterwards until she's reduced Patience to tears. "I didn't want to do it," says Patience, "you made me. When I said I didn't want to, you told me I was wicked and disobedient, but now that I've done it, you keep picking on me." After that she makes it up with Patience and begs to be forgiven.'
'That *can't* be true,' said Er-jie. 'If she's really the harpy you say she is, how could she possibly be frightened of a mere chamber-wife?'
'Because Patience has reason on her side,' said Joker. 'It's like the proverb says: "Three men with a carrying-pole can't shift Reason from its place." Patience has been with the mistress since she was a little girl. There were four maids that carne with the mistress when she married, but only Patience stayed on with her. The other three either died or got married. The mistress gave her to the master to be his chamber-wife partly because she wanted to show everyone what a virtuous wife she was and partly because she thought it would be a way of binding him to her. Miss Patience is a really good sort. She's not the sort of person to go looking for trouble, and she's always been good and true to the mistress. That's why the mistress always makes it up with her.'
'I see,' said Er-jie. 'But haven't I heard that there are a young widow and a number of young ladies in the family? If your mistress is as awful as you say she is, how comes it that these other ones let her get away with it?'

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Joker clapped his hands together and laughed.
Because the "young widow" you're talking about - that's our Mrs Zhu - is a Saint. The nickname we servants give her is "Lady Gwanyin". She doesn't as a rule have anything to do with household matters. She spends all her time teaching the young ladies writing and broidering and book4earning. That's *her* job. She has done a bit of household managing since the mistress fell ill, but even now she doesn't interfere very much: just follows the rules, very quiet and ladylike - no throwing her weight about or showing off h6w clever she is like the other one. of the young ladies, the eldest one - well, I suppose she must be a good 'un to have been so favoured. The second one - that's the master's sister - we call her "Miss Doddyblock". She'd probably forget to say "oh" if you stuck a pin in her. The third - Master Bao's younger sister -we call "The Rose -'Why do you call her that?' the You sisters asked simultaneously.
'Sweet and pretty and everyone loves her, but she has a thorn,' said Joker. 'The great pity about *her* is that she's not Her Ladyship's child. A phoenix reared in a crow's nest, that's what *she* is. The fourth young lady is really Mr Zhen's sister, but Her Ladyship brought her over to our mansion when she was still a baby and brought her up there with the others. She's a big girl now, but still pays no attention to what goes on around her, no more than the second one. Then besides our four there are two other young ladies that you probably won't have heard about - both very, very beautiful. One is Sir Zheng's sister's child. Her name is Miss Lin. Though she's so beautiful, she's very thin and weakly. The other is Her Ladyship's sister's child. Her name is Miss Xue.'
'Miss Wood and Miss Snow,' said Er-jie, smiling.
'If we ever meet them on their way through the courtyard or getting into their carriages when they go out,' said Joker, 'we none of us dare to breathe.'
'Of course,' said Er-jie. 'A great household like yours is sure to be very strict about such matters. Though young boys like you would be allowed into the courtyards, you would

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naturally be expected to keep your distance when the young ladies are about.'

'No, no, no,' said Joker, waving his hand energetically. 'That's not the reason we're afraid to breathe. We're afraid that if we breathed out too hard, we might blow Miss Lin over and cause Miss Xue to melt!'

The three You ladles, the Mattress and the two maids all burst Out laughing.

But who *was* it that San-jie wanted to marry? This will be revealed (if you want to know) in the following chapter.

CHAPTER 66

Shame drives a warm-hearted young woman
to take her life
And shock leads a cold-hearted young gentleman
to renounce the world

Our last chapter concluded with Joker's female audience laughing at the notion of Miss Wood's being blown down and Miss Snow melted by the breathing-out of the pages. The Mattress dealt him a playful box on the ear.
'There may be some truth in what you say; but your way of telling things turns even good sense into nonsense,' she said. 'You are more like one of Bao-yu's boys than one of the Master's.'
Er-jie was about to ask another question, but San-jie got in first.
'Yes now, about Bao-yu: what does he *do* - apart from going to school?'
Joker laughed.
'Don't ask about him, Miss! You'd never believe half of it if I told you. To begin with, although he's such a big fellow now, he's never had what you might call a proper schooling. Everyone in the family since his great-grandfather's time, including the Master, had to do their ten years in the family school; but not him. Bao-yu doesn't *like* study; so because he is Her Old Ladyship's darling, that's that. Sir Zheng used to try and do something with him, but that was soon put a stop to by Her Old Ladyship. Nowadays he spends the whole of his time just fooling around. You can't understand what he's talking about half the time, and you can't make any sense of what he does. He *looks* bright enough, and people always assume from his looks that he must be clever; but underneath it he's stupid. You can tell he must be stupid from the fact that he never has a word to say for himself when he meets anyone. I'll give him this, though: although he doesn't go to

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school, he *can* Write a bit. That's about the only thing he's any good at. He doesn't study, he doesn't care for physical training, and he doesn't like meeting people. He just spends all his time playing around with a pack of maids. He's soft, too. Sometimes when he sees us, if he's in the mood, he'll play with us as if he were an equal. Other times he ignores us and we ignore him. If we're sitting down or lying down when he comes by, we don't get up for him; we just take no notice. He doesn't care. Nobody's afraid of him. We do just what we like when he's around. He never stops us.'
'You talk like this about someone who is easy-going with you,' said San-jie, 'yet you complain just as much about someone who is strict. One can see that you are difficult people to employ!'
'I always thought Bao-yu looked so nice,' said Er-jie. 'How disappointing to learn that there is really nothing in him after all!'
'You surely don't believe the rubbish this boy has been talking, sister?' said San-jie impatiently. 'We have, after all, seen Bao-yu several times ourselves. I suppose you could call him effeminate. Whether he is eating or talking or moving about, there is certainly something rather girlish about his manner. That comes from spending nearly all his time in the women's quarters with no other males around. But stupid? I hardly think he can be called that. Don't you remember when we were still in mourning, that time we were standing watching the monks as they went round the coffin and he stood right in front of us? Everyone said how ill-mannered it was of him and how inconsiderate. But then afterwards he quietly came up to us and explained: "I hope you didn't think it very inconsiderate of me to stand in front of you like that," he said' "but I noticed how dirty some of those monks were and I was afraid that the smell of them might distress you." Then shortly after that, when he was drinking some tea and you said you'd like some too, he stopped one of the old women from emptying the slops out of his cup and filling it up again for you. "No, no," he said, "that's dirty! You must wash it first before you pour her any." Just on the strength of those two incidents I think you 6ught in fairness to agree that,

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when he is with girls at any rate, he is perfectly capable. People fail to find out what he is really like because they are put off by his manner.'

'To hear you speak, it sounds as if the two of you would get on very well together,' said Er-jie. 'I think we *ought* to betroth you to him. Why not?'

San-jie was prevented from answering by Joker's presence. She merely looked down and occupied herself by cracking a melon-seed between her teeth.

'They'd make a fine pair,' said Joker, 'whether from the point of view of looks or of character. The only thing is, he's got someone else already. Although it hasn't been made official yet, it's as good as certain that he's going to marry Miss Lin. The reason they haven't been properly engaged yet is because Miss Lin is so often ill' and also because they are still a bit on the young side; but two or three years from now, as soon as Her Old Ladyship gives the word, they are sure to be.'
They were still discussing this when Rich arrived with a message from Jia Lian.

‘Sir She is sending the Master to Ping-an in a few days’ time on important secret business. He’ll probably be away for fifteen or sixteen days. He can’t come back here tonight, but he says, Mrs You, will you and the Mistress get that business you know about settled, so that when lie comes tomorrow, he’ll know what he has to do?’

Ilaving delivered this message, he went back again, taking Joker with him. Er-jie had the gate dosed after them and retired early for the night, a good part of which she spent in extracting the required information from her sister.

Jia Lian did not arrive until after noon next day. Er-jie expressed concern that he had come at all.

‘If you have something important to do, you don’t need to put yourself in a rush by coming here. I should hate to be the cause of your starting late.’

‘It isn’t anything really important,’ said Jia Lian, ‘just a job that needs doing which happens to be rather far away. I shall have to leave by the beginning of next month and it will be about half a month before I get back.’

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‘Well, while you are away, just concentrate on the job,’ said Er-jie. ‘You don’t have to worry about anything here. We shall be perfectly all right. San-jie isn’t the sort of girl to change her mind overnight and she has definitely chosen her man now. I think you will have to go along with her choice.’

‘Ah yes,’ said Jia Lian. ‘Who is it?’

‘Someone who may not be available at present, in which case it’s anyone’s guess when he will be back,’ she smiled. ‘I must admit, she has a very good eye. And she says that she is prepared to wait as long as it will take - ten years if necessary. If by any chance he’s dead or for some reason or other can’t ever come, she says she will cut her hair off and become a nun. She would rather spend the rest of her life in prayer and fasting than marry anyone else.’

‘Well, come on!’ said Jia Lian. ‘Who *is* this person who has made such a powerful impression on her?’

‘It’s a long story,’ said Er-jie. ‘Five years ago my mother took us both with her to her old home for my grandmother’s birthday. The family had invited a troupe of amateur actors for the occasion, all young men of good family. The one who played the junior male lead was called Liu Xiang-lian. *He* is the only man my sister is prepared to marry. Last year he got himself into some sort of trouble and had to go into hiding, and we don’t know whether he’s out of it yet or not.’

‘So that’s who it is!’ said Jia Lian. ‘No wonder she is so keen. Yes, she certainly has a good eye. There’s something you probably don’t know about him, though. Young Liu is a very handsome young man, but he’s an awfully cold fish. He has very few real friends. Bao-yu is probably the person he gets on best with. He took himself off somewhere or other last year after beating up that oaf Xue Pan -I suppose because he wanted to avoid meeting us. I haven’t seen him since then. Someone did tell me that they’d heard he was back, but it may have been only a rumour. I can easily find out by asking one of Bao-yu’s pages. - But suppose it *is* only a rumour. He’s such a rolling stone, it may be years before he comes back again. Won’t it be rather a waste for her to put off marrying for so long?’

‘When our San-jie says she’s going to do something, she

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does it,’ said Er-jie. ‘I think you will have to go along with her.’

They were interrupted at this point by San-jie herself, who had evidently been listening to their conversation and chose this moment to come into the room.

‘Set your mind at rest, brother-in-law. I am not one of those people who say one thing and mean another; I really do mean what I say. If Liu turns up, I shall marry him. From now on and until he does I shall spend all my time praying, fasting and looking after Mamma. If he has still not turned up when Mamma is no longer here to look after, I shall go into a convent.’

She drew a jade hairpin from her hair and deliberately broke it in two.

‘So be it with me if I do not do exactly as I have sworn!’ She went straight back to her room then; and from that day onwards her conduct was indeed exemplary.

Jia Lian could see that he had no choice but to fall in with her wishes, and after a brief discussion of domestic matters with Er-jie, went home for further discussions with Xi-feng about the preparations for his journey. While at home he sent someone to ask Tealeaf about Liu Xiang-lian.

‘I’m afraid I don’t know,’ said Tealeaf. ‘I should think he probably hasn’t come back yet. If he had, I should almost certainly have got to hear about it.’

Inquiries made among Xiang-lian’s neighbours confirmed that he had not returned. Jia Lian was obliged to report back to Er-jie that he had drawn a blank.

A little before he was due to begin his journey, Jia Lian took leave of Xi-feng and the family, but only in order to spend his last two nights with Er-jie. He found San-jie so altered on this visit as to seem almost a different person Er-jie, too, showed herself so careful and competent in her management of the little household that he could see there would be no need to worry about either of them while he was away.

Jia Lian left the city early on the day of his departure and thereafter followed the main road to Ping-an, putting up at some staging-post or hostelry each night and making shorter stops for meals and refreshments

during the day. After two

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days of uneventful travelling he came, on the third day, upon a little caravan moving towards him along the road ahead consisting of a number of pack-animals and some ten or so horsemen, of whom the leading two appeared to be masters and the rest servants. As they drew near enough for him to make out their faces, Jia Lian saw with astonishment that the two leading horsemen were Xue Pan and Liu Xiang-lian and urged his horse forwards to meet them. After greetings and the customary generalities had been exchanged, the three of them went into a near-by inn to sit down together and talk. Jia Lian asked the question that had been puzzling him.

'After your little incident last year, the rest of us were anxious to make it up between you, but young Liu seemed to have disappeared without a trace. How do you come to be together now?'

'It's a very strange story,' said Xue Pan. 'My boys and I finished selling our stuff off in the spring and we've been on our homeward journey ever since. Everything was going quite smoothly until a couple of days ago. Then just as we were approaching Ping-an, we ran into a gang of robbers who took away all our things. But just at that very moment up pops young Xiang-lian out of nowhere, drives off the robbers, gets all our stuff back for us, and saves our lives. He refused to let me thank him, but in the end he agreed that we should become blood-brothers. We've been travelling together ever since. From now on we're going to be just like real brothers to each other. He's leaving me at the next crossroads and going off sixty or seventy miles south of here to look up an aunt of his, while I go on ahead to the capital. When I've settled my own affairs, I'm going to find a new house for him and fix him up with a nice little wife, and we're both going to settle down and be family men.'

'I see,' said Jia Lian. 'Well, I'm glad to hear it. It's a pity we had all that worry for nothing.'

He paused a moment before continuing.

'You said something a moment ago about finding young Liu a wife. I happen to know of someone who would suit him perfectly.'

He proceeded to tell the other two about his own marriage

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to Er-jie and how they were anxious to find a husband for her younger sister, omitting to mention, of course, that San-jie had chosen Liu Xiang-lian herself.

'Don't say anything about this to the others when you get home,' he told Xue Pan. 'I'm waiting until we have a son. I shall tell them about it then.'

Xue Pan seemed delighted.

'High time, too I' he said. 'Cousin Feng is to blame for not giving you one.'

'There you go again!, said Xiang-lian, laughing. 'You mustn't say things like that to people. Better keep your big mouth shut!'

Xue Pan obediently fell silent, merely observing, before he did so:

'We ought to take Lian up on his suggestion, though.'

'I'd always set my heart on marrying a stunningly beautiful girl,' said Xiang-lian. 'However, since you both recommend this one, I'm prepared to lower my expectations a bit. Yes, all right, Mr Jia. I leave it to you to arrange this, then. I put myself in your hands.'

'I don't ask you to believe this now,' said Jia Lian, smiling. 'You'll be able to judge for yourself when you see her: but this sister-in-law of mine *is* a stunningly beautiful girl. I should go so far as to say she must be one of the most beautiful women who have ever lived.'

Xiang-lian brightened.

'All right, then. Shall we fix it up when I get back to the capital in about a month's time, when I have finished seeing my aunt?'

'If you and I were the only ones involved, I would gladly leave it at that,' said Jia Lian, 'but knowing how unpredictable your movements are, I can't help feeling a little nervous on the girl's behalf. Suppose you failed to turn up? It could mean a whole lifetime wasted. I think you ought to give me some sort of pledge.'

'A gentleman's word ought to be pledge enough,' said Xiang-lian. 'In any case, I'm always hard up; I'm not in a position to give you a betrothal gift - particularly when I am on the road like this, away from home.'

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‘There’s all my stuff at your disposal,’ said Xue Pan. ‘Help yourself. Give him a share of that.’

‘It isn’t money or jewellery I’m after,’ said Jia Lian. ‘It doesn’t have to be anything valuable. Just give me something you carry about with you that I can take back with me as a token.’

‘At all events, I can’t give you this sword,’ said Xiang-lian. ‘I need it for self-defence. I have got another sword in my luggage I could let you have - well, two swords, really: it’s a pair of swords in one scabbard, what they call a “Duck and Drake” sword. It’s a family heirloom. I never use it, but I always carry it around with me. I could never bear to be parted from it for long, so however much I may wander, if you take that as my pledge, you can be sure of my eventually coming back to get it.’

He handed Jia Lian the heirloom when he had got it out of his bundle, and after a few more drinks the three men remounted, took leave of each other, and went their separate ways.

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In due course Jia Lian arrived at Ping-an and saw the Military Governor, only to be told that the business he had come about could not be dealt with satisfactorily until some time in the tenth month. As there was no point in staying, he started back the very next day for the capital, calling in first at Er-jie’s place on his arrival.

Er-jie had run the little household during his absence with exemplary circumspection. The courtyard gate had been kept shut and bolted all day and she had received no outside visitors. San-jie, too - a young woman who never did anything by halves - had continued as good as her word. When not actually keeping to her own room, she had spent the whole of the time either ministering to the wants of her mother or sitting and sewing with Er-jie. Jia Lian was gratified to find all these signs of prudent housekeeping on his return and his respect for Er-jie’s wifely virtues increased.

When the greetings and routine questionings were over, he told the sisters about his encounter with Liu Xiang-lian, and

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getting the Duck and Drake swords out of his luggage, he handed them to San-jie to take care of. San-jie first examined the scabbard. It was embossed with a design of interlacing dragons and sea-monsters and encrusted all over with jewels. Then she took out the swords, identical except that one had the character ‘Duck’ and the other the character Drake’ engraved on its blade. And what blades! Cold, cruel; glittering with the cold brightness of autumn waters. San-jie was enraptured by them. She put them both back into their scabbard and carried them off to her own room, where she hung them up over her bed. Thereafter she would look up at them from time to time and smile, happy in the knowledge that now her future was assured.

After a couple of nights with Er-jie, Jia Lian went back to Rong-guo House to report to his father and to rejoin the other members of the family. He found Xi-feng with the rest. She had by now recovered sufficiently to get about and had resumed her duties as household manager. As soon as he could, he went to see Cousin Zhen and tell him about San-jie and Liu Xiang-lian. Cousin Zhen was lately much taken up with a new acquaintance and had lost his former interest in the You sisters. He therefore received Jia Lian’s news with equanimity and seemed perfectly content to leave the matter in his hands, merely insisting on himself contributing thirty taels towards the expenses, since he feared that Jia Lian’s resources might be inadequate. Jia Lian accepted the money and handed it to Er-jie to spend on San-jie’s trousseau.

Round about the middle of the eighth month Xiang-lian arrived back in the capital and at once went to pay his respects to Aunt Xue and make the acquaintance of Xue Ke. He was told that Xue Pan had been ill in bed almost since the day he got back (some sickness brought on by change of water or the effects of travel) and was still under doctor’s treatment. However, on hearing that Xiang-lian had come, Xue Pan insisted on having him brought into his bedroom. He and his mother, whose earlier resentment against Xiang-lian had been completely banished by her gratitude to him for saving her son’s life, spoke eloquently of their indebtedness, and when the conversation turned to the subject of Xiang-lian’s marri-

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age, they insisted that all the material things required for it should be supplied by them, so that he should have nothing to do himself except name the day. It was now Xiang-lian’s turn to be grateful.

Next day Xiang-lian went to see Bao-yu. The two of them were always wonderfully at ease in each other’s company and Xiang-lian felt sufficiently intimate to ask him confidentially about the circumstances of Jia Lian’s second marriage.

‘I really don’t know - beyond what Tealeaf has told me,’ said Bao-yu. ‘I haven’t been to see them. I don’t really think it’s my business. Tealeaf mentioned that Cousin Lian was very anxious to see you about something, but I don’t know what it was.’

Xiang-lian told him about the various things that had happened to him on his travels, ending up with an account of his encounter with Jia Lian.

'Congratulations!' said Bao-yu. 'You are a lucky man. She's a ravishingly beautiful girl. The perfect match for a good-looking chap like you!'

'If she is so beautiful,' said Xiang-lian, 'there can be no shortage of suitors wanting to marry her. Why should your cousin pick on me? I've never been particularly friendly with him in the past - certainly not to that extent - yet when I met him on this journey, he was so pressing, so insistent that I should give him a definite undertaking to marry her. What am I to make of it? It's almost as if the girl's family was doing the pursuing. I can't help feeling very dubious about the whole affair. I wish I hadn't given him those swords. I thought of you as the person most likely to be able to help me get to the bottom of this business.'

'For a person so intelligent you have left it a bit late to start feeling dubious now that you have promised to marry the girl and already given them your pledge,' said Bao-yu. 'You started off by saying that you wanted to marry a beauty. Now that you've got one, why not leave it at that? Why these suspicions?'

'You said just now you didn't even know about her sister's marriage,' said Xiang-lian. 'How do you *know* she is so beautiful?'

'I saw her practically every day for a month at Ning-guo

House when she and her sister were brought there by Cousin Zhen's mother-in-law,' said Bao-yu. 'How could I fail to know? Ravishingly beautiful. Obviously made for you. *You* San-jie, you see: even the name makes her yours!'

Xiang-lian stamped impatiently.

'And everyone else's, no doubt.' Bao-yu's execrable pun had not amused him. 'It won't do. This is a thoroughly bad business. The only clean things about that Ning-guo House are the stone lions that stand outside the gate. The very cats and dogs there are corrupted!'

Bao-yu reddened, and Xiang-lian, realizing that he had gone too far, began pumping his bands apologetically.

'I'm sorry, I shouldn't have said that. - But surely you can tell me something about her character?'

'Since you appear to know already, I don't. quite see the point,' said Bao-yu wryly. 'In any case, perhaps I'm none too clean myself.'

'What I said was spoken in the heat of the moment,' said Xiang-lian. 'You mustn't take it to heart.'

'I've already forgotten it,' said Bao-yu. 'If you go on talking about it, you will make it seem that the one who has taken it to heart is you.'

Xiang-lian pumped his hands again and took his leave. He was still thoroughly unhappy about the whole affair. At first he thought of going back to Xue Pan and talking it over with him; then he changed his mind, partly because Xue Pan was ill but mainly because in any case he had little confidence in his judgement. In the end he decided that perhaps the best thing would be simply to ask for his pledge back. Once he had made up his mind, he decided to tackle Jia Lian about it immediately. He found him at Er-jie's place.

Jia Lian, delighted to hear that Xiang-lian had already come to call, came hurrying out to meet him and conducted him to the inside sitting-room to introduce him to his future mother-in-law. He was somewhat surprised when Xiang-lian merely bowed to the old lady instead of making her a kotow and addressed her formally as 'Mrs You'. The significance of this became apparent presently when tea was served and Xiang-lian came at once to the point.

'I am afraid that when I met you recently on my travels I

acted far too hastily. I didn't know at the time, hut it seems that my aunt had already in the fourth month chosen another girl to be my wife. When she told me about it, there was obviously nothing I could say. To hold to my agreement with you would have meant disobeying my aunt, and that of course is out of the question. Now, if the pledge I gave you had been gold or silk or something of that sort, I should simply have forgotten about it; but those swords I gave you were a family heirloom left me by my grandfather, so I'm afraid I shall very regretfully have to ask you for them back.'

Jia Lian was unable to take this calmly.

'Now look here, young Liu, this won't do, you know! A pledge is a pledge. The whole idea of it is to guard against people having second thoughts like this. An engagement to marry isn't something you can just jump into and out of at will. I'm afraid what you are proposing is quite impossible.'

Xiang-lian smiled patiently.

'No doubt you are in the right, and I am perfectly prepared for you to reproach me; but I'm afraid I cannot go through with this marriage under any circumstances.'

Jia Lian seemed about to argue, but Xiang-lian frustrated him by rising to his feet.

'Could we go and discuss this somewhere else, please? It isn't very convenient, talking about it in here.'

You San-jie had been able to hear the whole of this conversation quite clearly from her room. She had waited so long for Xiang-lian, and now that at last he had come, he was rejecting her. It must be because of

something he had heard about her in the Jia mansion. He probably thought of her as a shameless wanton, the sort of woman who throws herself at men, unworthy to be his wife. If she allowed the two men to go off together, there was little likelihood that Jia Lian could do anything to stop him breaking off the engagement; and even if he tried arguing with him, the probable outcome would only be further damage to her reputation. As soon, therefore, as she heard Jia Lian agreeing to go outside with him, she snatched the swords down from the wall, and having first drawn out the Duck and hidden it behind her back, she hurried into the sitting-room to see them.

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'There is no need for you to go out and discuss anything,' she said. 'Here is your pledge back.'

The tears were pouring down her cheeks like rain. She held out the scabbard with the single sword in it in her left hand. As Xiang-lian took it, she whipped the other sword out with her right hand and slashed it across her throat. It was all over in a moment.

Red scatter of broken blossoms, and the jade column fallen, Never to rise again ...

The terrified servants made futile attempts to resuscitate her, but she was already dead. Old Mrs You wept and screamed, breaking off from time to time to inveigh against Xiang-lian as a murderer. Jia Lian seized hold of Xiang-lian and called for someone to bring a rope, intending to tie him up and take him to the yamen; but Er-jie checked her weeping and did her best to dissuade him.

'He didn't force her to do it, it was her own decision. What good will taking him to the yamen do? We don't want a public scandal on top of everything else. Much better let him go.'

Jia 'Ian, whose resolution seemed temporarily to have deserted him, let go of Xiang-lian automatically: but Xiang lian made no attempt to escape.

'I didn't know she was like this,' he said, weeping. 'She had a noble heart. It wasn't my luck to have her.'

He lifted up his own voice then and wept, as if he had been weeping for his bride. He stayed with the family until the coffin had been bought and San-jie laid inside it; and when the lid was closed over her, he threw himself on it and clung to it for a long time weeping. Only then did he take leave of them, walking alone Out of the gate, blinded by his tears and scarcely knowing where he was going.

As he walked along in a daze, his thoughts full of San-jie's rare combination of beauty and resoluteness which he had so wantonly rejected, one of Xue Pan's little pages came looking for him to take him to his new house. Xiang4ian was too distracted to pay the boy much attention and allowed himself to be led there by the hand. It was a pleasant, well-appointed

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little house While he and the page stood waiting in the sitting-room, he heard a little tinkling noise - the sound made by the girdle-gems of a hurrying woman - and San-jie came into it from outside. She had the Duck cradled in her right attn. Her left hand was holding some sort of album or ledger.

'I loved you for five years,' she said. (The tears were still running down her cheeks.) 'I did not know that your heart was as cold as your face. It was a foolish love, and I have paid for it with my life. Now I am ordered to go to the Fairy Disenchantment's tribunal in the Land of Illusion to keep the records of the other lovers who are under her jurisdiction. But I could not bear to leave without seeing you lust once more before I go. After this I shall never see you again.'

She began to go, but Xiang-lian wanted to question her and tried to stop her going. She spoke again, but this time it sounded more like an incantation.

'From love I came; from love I now depart. I wasted my life for love, and now that I have woken up, I am ashamed of my folly. From now on we are nothing to each other, you and I - nothing.'

A little gust of wind with a faint fragrance on it seemed to blow past him as she uttered these last words, and the very next moment she had vanished.

Xiang-lian came to himself with a start, uncertain whether or not he had been dreaming. He could see no sign of Xue Pan's little page when he looked about him, and the new house had turned into a dilapidated temple. Not far from him a Taoist with a crippled leg sat catching and killing his lice. Xiang-lian got up and went over to him.

'What is this place, holy one?' he asked, having first clasped his hands and knocked them against his forehead in the appropriate salutation. 'And may I know whom I have the honour of addressing?'

The Taoist chuckled.

'I don't know where this place is any more than you do. Nor who I am. It is a place where I am resting a little while before going on elsewhere.'

It felt to Xiang-lian as if a douche of icy water had penetrated him to the bone with its coldness. He understood.

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Without a moment's hesitation he drew the companionless Drake out of its scabbard, stretched out his queue, slashed through

the unnumbered strand,
That bind us to the world and its annoys,

and as soon as the Taoist was ready, followed him out into the world. But where the two of them went to, I have no idea. Other information apart from that will be available in the following chapter.

CHAPTER 67

Frowner sees something that
makes her homesick
And Xi-feng hears something that
rouses her suspicions

The grief occasioned in old Mrs You, Er-jie, Cousin Zhen and Jia Lian by San-jie's suicide can be imagined. It long outlasted her burial outside the city walls, which took place shortly after the encoffining. As for Liu Xiang-lian, the human repinings felt by that somewhat cold young man when he realized the value of what he had lost were brought to an abrupt end (as we have shown) by the even colder words of the Taoist, which, by breaking through the Barrier of Confusion and opening his eyes to the vanity of human affections, caused him to renounce the world by symbolically severing his hair and following the mad holy man in his wanderings. The direction these to6k them in is unknown, as we stated in the previous chapter. Let us leave them and see how others were affected by these events.

Aunt Xue had been delighted by the news of Xiang-lian's betrothal to You San-jie. The wedding would give her an opportunity of demonstrating her gratitude to him for saving her son's life. She was excitedly planning for this event -discussing the purchase of a house and furniture, selecting a date, making arrangements for the ceremony and so forth -when one of the household boys came in with the appalling news that San-jie had cut her throat and Xiang-lian decided to become a Taoist. She was still puzzling over the incomprehensible nature of this disaster when Bao-chai came over from the Garden.

'Child, have you heard the news?' Aunt Xue asked her. 'Mrs Zhen's younger sister, San-jie - the one that was engaged to marry Pan's new "brother" Liu Xiang-lian - has cut her throat. I've no idea why. And Xiang-lian has renounced the

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world and just disappeared. Isn't it terrible? I don't know what to make of it.'

Bao-chai heard her without emotion.

'It is as the proverb says, Mamma: "The weather and human life are unpredictable." This was probably preordained because of something they did in their past lives. The other day you were planning to do everything you could for him because of what he did for Pan. Now she is dead and he has disappeared. I think the best thing you can do is just forget about them. There is no point in upsetting yourself on their account; there are other things to worry about. It is more than a fortnight now since Pan got back from the South and the goods he brought with him must all have been disposed of by now. Surely you ought to have a word with him about entertaining the people who went with him on the journey? They had a good deal of hardship to put up with during their months of travel. It will seem very uncouth of us if we do not find some way of showing our appreciation.'

While Bao-chai and her mother were talking, Xue Pan came in from outside. His eyes were still wet from recent weeping.

'Mamma,' he said, 'have you heard about Xiang-lian and San-jie ?'

'They told me only a few minutes ago,' said Aunt Xue. 'Your sister and I were talking about it when you came in.'

'You heard that Xiang-lian had gone off with some Taoist then,' said Xue Pan.

'Yes,' said Aunt Xue. 'That's what's so extraordinary. Why should an intelligent young man like that suddenly take leave of his senses to go wandering off with a Taoist? As he had no parents or brothers, I think it's up to you as his best friend to find him. They say the Taoist is both mad and lame, so they cannot have got very far probably no farther than one of the temples or monasteries in this vicinity.'

'That's exactly what *I* thought, Mamma,' said Xue Pan. 'As soon as I heard the news, I went around looking for him with the boys, but we couldn't find a trace of him anywhere, and none of the people we talked to seemed to have seen him.'

'Well, if you've already looked for him and he can't be

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found, you've done as much as a friend *could* do,' said Aunt Xue. 'Some good might yet come of it, you never know. What you've got to do now is start getting your business back into shape. And for another thing, it's time you started thinking about your own marriage and making a few preparations. We've got no other man in the family but you and you're not as bright as you might be. You know what they say about baby birds learning to fly. The sillier the bird, the sooner it must begin. If you start getting ready well in advance, there will be less danger of making yourself ridiculous when the time comes by finding that there are all sorts of things you have forgotten. And there's something else I want to talk to you about. Your Sister has just been pointing out to me, it's more than a fortnight since you came back and the goods you brought hack with you must all have been sold off by now. You ought to give a little party for those of our employees who went with you on the journey - just a little gesture to show them that you appreciate their services. After all, it was a long journey. What would it be? A thousand miles there and back? Pretty nearly. You were four or five months away, at all events. And don't forget, they underwent some very alarming experiences on your behalf.'
'You're absolutely right, Mamma,' said Xue Pan. 'And sis, she always thinks of everything. I *had* thought about it myself, but during these last few days, what with running around everywhere disposing of the stock until my head feels' as if it will burst and running around getting things ready for Xianglian's wedding (fat lot of good *that* was, now that it's all come to nothing!) I somehow didn't get round to it. Still, it's not too late. We can fix a time for tomorrow or the day after and send the invitations out straight away.'
'I leave all that to you,' said his mother.
The words were scarcely out of her mouth when one of the pages came in from outside to report.
'There are some men here from the shop with two cases of stuff for you and a message from Mr Zhang. He says these are the things you bought for yourself, that aren't on the stock-list. He would have sent them round earlier, but there were a lot of other cases on top of them and he couldn't get them

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out He says they didn't finish selling the stock off until yesterday, so this is the first time he has been able to get at them.'
Two other pages carried the two cases in, one after the other, while he was speaking. They were large coir trunks, protectively crated between pairs of roped-together boards.
'Aiyo!' said Xue Pan. 'How stupid of me! I brought these things back specially for you and sis, Mamma, but I completely forgot to bring them home with me. Fancy the boys in the shop having to remember them for me!'
'It's a good thing you "brought them back specially", said Bao-chai. 'Now we're only getting them a fortnight late. If you hadn't "brought them back specially", we should probably have had to wait until the end of the year! It's the same with everything you do. You are so thoughtless.'
Xue Pan laughed.
'I think it's because of that scare we had on the journey. It scared the wits out of me and they haven't got back into the right holes yet.'
The others laughed He turned to the boy who had come in with the message.
'All right. Tell the men outside we've got the stuff now and they can go back to the shop.'
Aunt Xue and Bao-chai were curious.
'Well, what is it you've got all crated and corded up so carefully?'
Xue Pan told the pages to untie the ropes, remove the protecting boards and undo the fastenings of the trunks. The first one contained mostly materials - silks, satins, brocades and so forth - and various foreign articles of domestic use.
'The other trunk is. stuff I got specially for you, sis,' said Xue Pan.
He undid the fastenings of it himself. Besides writingbrushes, ink-sticks, inkstones, different sorts of fancy stationery, purses, rosaries, fans, fan-cases, face-powder, rouge and other feminine articles, it contained a whole lot of novelties from Hu-qiu-shan: little mercury-filled automata who turned somersaults when you put them down on the floor or a table, automata with sand-filled cylindrical bodies whose arms, legs

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and heads moved when you set the sand running, and lots and lots of scenes from drama made up of tiny figures moulded in coloured clay in cases of transparent **green** gauze. Most fascinating of all was a tiny made-to-order figure of Xue Pan himself, looking exactly like the original in every detail. Bao- chai had no eyes for anything but this. Picking the tiny replica up in her hand to examine it, she looked from it to the original and burst out laughing. She had the other things put back into the trunk and ordered two of the older servants to carry it to All-spice Court for her under Oriole's supervision while she herself stayed chatting a little longer with her mother and brother. Then she too went back into the Garden.

After she had gone, Aunt Xue proceeded to go over the contents of the other trunk with Providence, taking them out, putting them into separate piles, and explaining which pile was to be given to Grandmother Jia,

which to Lady Wang, and so forth.
Xue Pan for his part began there and then to make preparations for a party. The invitations to his employees were dispatched with great urgency, for he was determined that the party should be on the very next day. As a number of people were invited, it took some time for all of them to assemble and there was much talk about trading, accountancy and the disposal of stock before the last of the guests had arrived. When they were all present, Xue Pan invited them to take their places at table and went round himself with the wine-kettle to fill their cups. Aunt Xue sent someone in to thank them on the family's behalf for their loyal service. Thereupon drinking began and conversation of a more general kind among the guests. Presently one of them observed that a good friend was missing from their company whose presence might have been expected.
'Oh?' said the others. 'Who's that?'
'Mr Liu,' the man said, 'that saved all our lives and became a blood-brother to the master.'
This started a good deal of speculation among the guests and finally one of them asked Xue Pan outright why he had not invited him. Xue Pan frowned and sighed.
'Don't ask me about *him,'* he said. 'It's a very funny busi-

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ness. It isn't "Mr Liu" now any longer. It's "Father Liu".' The The others expressed surprise.
'How can that be?'
Xue Pan related the whole story to them. They were even more surprised when they heard.
'Now I understand what they were shouting about yesterday outside the shop,' said one of them. 'It was something about a man having been converted by only two or three words spoken to him by a Taoist. Someone else said the two of them had vanished into thin air. They didn't say who the man was. We were all busy selling stock at the time, so we couldn't go outside to find out and we've been wondering ever since whether to believe the story or not. We never imagined it was Mr Liu they were talking about. If we'd known, we'd have gone after him and tried to reason with him. I'm sure we'd have found some way of stopping him.'
'I've got a different theory about what happened,' said one of them.
'Oh? What's that?' the others asked him.
'Well,' said the man with the theory, 'it doesn't seem very likely that a clever young chap like Mr Liu would suddenly go off to become the disciple of an old Taoist We know how strong he is and how good at martial arts. Perhaps he'd found out that this Taoist was really a wicked magician and just pretended to become his disciple so that when he'd got him to some quiet, out-of-the-way place he could do him in.'
'If that's what it is, that's very good,' said Xue Pan. 'There are too many of these fellows going around leading people astray with their silly nonsense. It needs a person like Xianglian to put a few of them down.'
'But didn't you look for Mr Liu yourself when you heard about this?' his guests asked him.
'Of course I did,' said Xue Pan. 'Inside *and* outside the city. And I don't mind telling you - you can laugh at me if you like - I had a good old cry when I couldn't find him.'
He sighed several times and looked very despondent. His customary cheerfulness seemed to have deserted him altogether since this loss. Seeing him so downcast, his employees did not venture to stay long, but drank the wine up, finished

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up the food, and dispersed. We, too, shall leave him at this point and continue our interrupted narrative of the previous day.

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When Bao-chai got back from her mother's to her own room in All-spice Court, she went over the toys that Xue Pan had given her, deciding which of her cousins each one of them should go to and retaining only a very few of them for herself. When she had finished doing that, she proceeded to portion out the other things as well. For some of the cousins there were writing-brushes, paper, inkstones and ink; for others, purses, fans and rosaries; some were to have hair-oil, powder and rouge; for some there were to be only toys. She made the little piles as equal as possible, except in the case of Dai-yu, for whom she selected twice as much as for anyone else. Having explained very carefully to Oriole who each of the piles was for, she sent her off, with an old woman acting as portress, to go round to all the apartments and deliver them.
With one exception, the cousins, on receiving their presents, tipped the bearers and said that they would thank Bao-chai in person when they next saw her. Dai-yu alone reacted somewhat differently. The sight of the Hu-qiu toys, manufactured only a few miles from her native Soochow, brought on a severe attack of nostalgia. Once more she was reminded of her position: an orphan and an outsider, with no kind brother in *her* case to bring back things for her from the South. Already she was beginning to be upset. Nightingale knew at once what was the matter, but judged it more politic to remonstrate than to let her mistress know that she understood.
'Look at all the illness you've had, miss. You hardly ever stop taking medicine. It's only just recently that you've begun to look a bit better. Though even now I think it's more a case of being in better spirits than being properly cured. You can see from the fact that Miss Bao has sent you all these things that she must think a lot of you. That ought to make you happy, not upset you. Whatever is Miss Bao going to think if she gets to

hear that the things she has sent you have made

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you feel miserable? That's not going to he very nice for her, is it? And there's another thing. Look how concerned Her Old Ladyship and Her Ladyship always are about your health, how they get the best doctors and the best medicines to try and cure you. And now, just as you are beginning to be a little bit better, here you go, crying and making yourself miserable. It's as if you *wanted* to get ill again, just to give them something more to worry about! It was too much fretting that brought on your illness in the first place. You ought to have a bit more consideration for yourself.'

While Nightingale was admonishing her mistress, a voice from the courtyard was heard announcing 'Master Bao'. Nightingale called to him to come inside.

'Sit down,' said Dai-yu..

Bao-yu noticed that she had been crying.

'Hullo, what's the matter?' he asked. 'Who's been upsetting you?'

Dai-yu forced a smile.

'I'm not upset.'

Nightingale shot her lips out and gestured towards the table behind Dai-yu's bed. His eyes followed her gesture to the pile of presents on the table. He realized she could only just have received them from Bao-chai.

'Why, what a lot of things you've got there!' he said. 'Are you planning to set up a shop?'

Dai-yu made no reply.

'Don't talk about them!' said Nightingale. 'They're from Miss Bao. As soon as Miss Lin set eyes on them, she burst into tears. I was just trying to talk some sense into her when you came in. Perhaps, now you're here, you'll be able to do it for me.'

Bao-yu knew what Dai-yu's trouble was as well as Nightingale, but was no more willing than Nightingale to show her that he knew. He merely laughed, therefore, and answered Nightingale with a jest.

'Oh, I know what's upset your mistress. She's cross because Miss Bao didn't send her more. Never mind, coz,' he said' turning to Dai-yu, 'one of these days I'll he visiting Kiangnan myself, and when I do, I promise to bring you back two whole

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boatloads of these things. That should dry your eyes for you!' Dai-yu, aware that she was being 'cheered up', could not rebuff the clumsy attempt too impatiently; nor, on the other hand, did she feel inclined to let it pass unreproved.

'I may be very stupid and ill-bred, but not quite to the extent of getting into a passion because I have not been given enough toys. I am not a three-year-old. You make me out to be even more petty-minded than I am. I have my own reasons for what I feel. What do *you* know about them?'

As she said this, the tears began once more to flow. Bao-yu moved over from his seat and sat down beside her on the bed. He began picking the articles on the table up one by one, turning them this way and that to examine them, and asking her all sorts of questions about them. What was this? What did you call it? Wasn't this one clever? What was it made of? And this one, what was it for? He also made various suggestions as to where she should put them. This one he thought would be nice to keep by her on her desk; that one would look well with the vases and other ornaments on the wall-table; and so on and so on until Dai-yu felt that, however well-intentioned this might be, she could stand no more.

'Come on, you're being a nuisance,' she said. 'Let's go and see Bao-chai.'

This was precisely what Bao-yu had been hoping for. If he could get her to go. out, the distraction of doing something else might cause her to forget her sadness.

'Good!' he said. 'We ought to go, anyway, to thank her for the things.'

'I wasn't thinking of that,' said Dai-yu. 'Between cousins there is no need for such formality. I was thinking that, having just got back from the South, Cousin Pan must have told her a lot about the places there he visited, and hearing about them from Chai would be the next best thing to taking a trip back there myself.'

Her eyes began to redden, and for a moment it seemed in doubt if she would go out after all; but as Bao-yu was already on his feet waiting for her, she was more or less obliged to follow him.

'After all the trouble Cousin Pan went to in getting them

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to you,' Bao-yu told Bao-chai when they were in her room, 'you ought to have kept those things for yourself, not given them all away t9 other people.'

'There's nothing very special about them,' said Bao-chai. 'They are all inexpensive objects made by local craftsmen which just happen to have come from a long way away. I thought the rest of you might find them amusing.'

'When I was little, these things were so familiar, to me that I thought nothing of them,' said Dai-yu. 'Now,

after all these years, they have become novelties again.'
"'The farther from home, the more precious the object" as the saying goes,' said Bao-chai. 'Not that these *are* precious, of course.'

Bao-yu feared that Bao-chai was moving onto dangerous ground and intervened to change the subject.
'Be sure to make Pan go again next year, Chai, and bring us back a lot more.'
Dai-yu stared.
'If you want to make such a request, that's your business, but kindly leave others out of it!' She turned to Bao-chai. 'He has not come here to thank you, you observe, but to put in an order for next year.'
Bao-chai and Bao-yu both laughed.
As the three of them chattered on, the conversation presently turned to the subject of Dai-yu's illness.
'When you are out of sorts,' Bao-chai suggested, 'you want to force yourself to go out of doors: walk around, visit people, look at things - anything td take your mind off yourself. You'll find it is much better for you than sitting cooped up indoors feeling miserable. *I* wasn't feeling very well recently. I felt exhausted all day long and hot all over and wanted to do nothing but lie down. This is a bad time of the year for me, and I was afraid of becoming seriously ill. So I started deliberately looking for things to do and forcing myself to do them; and do you know, during the last day or two I really have begun to feel better.'
'I am sure you are right,' said Dai-yu. 'I have in fact come to the same conclusion myself.'

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The person most gratified by Bao-chai's presents was Aunt Zhao.

'I'm not surprised they all say what a nice girl that Bao-chai is" she said to herself when the consignment of toys arrived for Jia Huan. 'You can see from this how kind and generous she is. Her brother can't have brought all that much back for her from his travels, yet every single person has been remembered. No one's been left out because they aren't important, even the unlucky ones like us that no one else ever bothers about. Now if it had been that Lin girl, it would have been a very different story. She can scarcely even bring herself to look you straight in the face. You wouldn't catch her sending us things like this!'

As these thoughts passed through her mind, she was turning the things over and over in her hands and arranging them this way and that upon the kang. Presently the thought occurred to her that Bao-chai was close kin to Lady Wang. Why should she not take advantage of that fact to ingratiate herself with Lady Wang? Gathering the articles up in her arms, she went off, full of fuss and self-importance, to Lady Wang's room and took up a position at her elbow.
'Look!' she said, putting on a very affected smile. 'Look what Bao-chai has just sent our Huan! Such thoughtfulness in one so young! She's a real little lady, Bao-chai. She has class. And so generous. You can't help admiring her. I don't wonder you and Her Old Ladyship are so fond of her and always speaking so highly of her. I didn't like to keep these things without your permission, that's why I've brought them. And I thought it might amuse you to look at them.'
Lady Wang had guessed what the motive for her visit must be long before she had finished. The clumsy attempt to ingratiate was by no means pleasing to her, but she could not ignore it altogether.
'Certainly you should keep them,' she said. 'Let Huan have them to play with.'

She had merely glanced at the toys in saying this and then turned away again.

So Aunt Zhao, who had been so cock-a-hoop when she came, had got nothing for her pains but a smutty nose. Angry, but

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not daring to show it, she returned crestfallen to her room and threw the things into a corner, muttering crossly to herself as she did so.

'Hfn! What do you make of that then?'

And she sat on her own there on the kang, continuing to mutter to herself as she brooded angrily on her wrongs.

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Oriole and the old woman had by this time finished delivering presents and went hack to give their mistress an account of the messages of thanks sent back by the recipients and the various tips they had received. As soon as the old woman had gone out, Oriole moved closer to where Bao-chai was sitting and spoke softly into her ear.

'When we were delivering at Mrs Lian's just now, Mrs Lian looked absolutely furious about something. I had a word with **Crimson** on my way out and she said that when Mrs Lian came back from Her Old Ladyship's a little before we arrived she was looking very grim - not at all her usual smiling self. She called for Patience as soon as she got back and they were talking earnestly together about something, but she couldn't hear what they were saying. It looks as though something really serious must have happened. Did you hear about anything while you were at Her Old Ladyship's today, miss?'

Bao-chai wondered what could have made Xi-feng so angry, but could think of nothing.

'Every household has its own troubles,' she told Oriole. 'It isn't our business to inquire. Go and pour me some tea.'

So Oriole went out to pour tea and nothing more on that subject was said.

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After seeing Dai-yu to her gate, Bao-yu continued on his way to **Green** Delights. While he did so, he was thinking how hard it must be to be an orphan and feeling more and more sorry for her. He resolved to have a word with Aroma about it when he got back, but when he got back, only Musk and Ripple were in his room.
'Where's Aroma?' he asked them.

'Must he in one or other of the courtyards hereabouts,' said Musk. 'She can't be lost. Why the sudden urge to see her?'
Bao-yu smiled.
'I didn't imagine she was lost. The reason I asked is because I've just got back from seeing Miss Lin. She seemed to be rather upset about something, and when I asked her what it was, she said the things that Miss Bao sent her were made quite near her old home and the sight of them had upset her. I was going to ask Aroma if she'd mind going over and having a word with her.'
'Oh dear I Who's in for it this time?'
It was Skybright who said this. She had come in at that moment and overheard only the last few words he had spoken. He repeated for her benefit the whole of what he had just been saying to Musk.
'Aroma went out a few minutes ago,' said Skybright. 'I think she was going to call on Mrs Lian. It's quite possible that she may drop in at Miss Lin's place on her way back.'
Bao-yu made no reply. Ripple poured him a cup of tea. He took it from her absent-mindedly, rinsed his mouth with some of it, handed the rest to one of the junior maids, and stretched himself out on his bed, looking thoroughly miserable.

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After Bao-yu went off to visit Dai-yu, Aroma had at first occupied herself with some sewing. While she was doing this, it suddenly occurred to her that it was some time since she had been to call on Xi-feng and ask about her illness. Now seemed as good a time as any to visit her, because she knew that Jia Lian was not there so that she would be able to converse with her more freely. When she had changed her clothes and, with the aid of a hand-mirror, made a few adjustments to her appearance, she went in again to tell Skybright of her decision.
'I'm off to Mrs Lian's now. Stay in the room while I'm gone, will you? We don't want Master Bao calling out and finding nobody there.'
'Aiyo!' said Skybright sarcastically. 'You are the only one

who ever thinks about him, of course. The rest of us just sit around all day doing nothing.'
Aroma merely laughed and went off without replying. As she came within sight of the water near Drenched Blossoms Bridge, she saw that the lotuses were all dead and ragged-looking; but the hibiscus-bushes along the banks were just coming into flower, the **pink** budding clusters making a brilliant contrast with the bright **green** of the leaves. She lingered on her way along the embankment so that she could get a better view of them. Looking up suddenly from her contemplation of the hibiscus bushes, she became aware that on the other

side of the path a little ahead of her someone was standing under the grape-vine waving a feather-duster about, apparently dusting something. When she got a little nearer, she could see that it was that indefatigable gardener, Mamma Zhu. Recognizing Aroma, the old woman beamed and came up to greet her.
'It's not often *you* find time to go out walking, miss?'
'No, indeed,' said Aroma. 'I'm on my way to see Mrs Lian. What are you doing?'
'I'm trying to keep these wasps off the grapes,' said the old woman. 'There was very little rain in the dog-days this year, consequently it's brought the pests out onto all the fruit. It gets riddled all over with bites and a lot of it is dropping before it's ripe. These wasps are terrible things. You'd never credit it. They'll go for just two or three grapes in a bunch, but the juice drips from them onto the rest, and then the whole bunch is spoiled. Look at that, miss! A whole lot more of them have settled just in the time we have been talking.'
'Even if you keep at it non-stop with that duster of yours, you're not going to keep off more than a few of them,' said Aroma. 'Why don't you ask one of the buyers to get a lot of muslin bags made for you, to tie over the bunches? They will keep off the birds and wasps while still allowing the air to get at them.'
'I certainly will,' said the old woman. 'What a clever idea! I've never heard of that one before - but then this is the first year I've had the job, you see.' She smiled. 'Look, miss,

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although so many of the grapes are spoiled, they still taste good. Let me pick you some to try.'

Aroma looked serious.

'No, no.1 don't think they're ripe enough to eat yet, in any case; but even if they were, I couldn't possibly eat any before the first-fruits have been offered to the ancestors. Surely a person who has worked as many years for the family as you have must know that rule?'
'Of course, miss. You are quite right,' said the old woman hurriedly. 'It was being so pleased that put it for the moment from my mind. I am a foolish old woman.'

'It doesn't really matter,' said Aroma. 'But you older servants ought not to set us younger ones a bad example.'

She continued on her way then, out of the Garden and round to Xi-feng's place. As she entered the courtyard, she could hear the sound of Xi-feng's raised voice coming from inside the house.

'It's monstrous! Treating me like a criminal, after all I've had to put up with in this place!'

Whatever the background of this remark might be, it was obvious to Aroma that this would be an extremely inopportune moment to go in; and yet it was already too late for her to turn back. The best she could do was to advertise her presence. She deliberately made a heavier noise with her feet and called out to Patience through the window. Patience came hurrying out to welcome her.

'Is Mrs Lian in?' Aroma asked her. 'Is she quite better yet?'
By now she was inside the house; but Xi-feng had already had time to get up on the couch and pretend that she had been lying down. She rose to her feet as Aroma entered.

'Yes, I am a little better, thank you. It is kind of you to remember me. It seems quite a time since you last came round here.'

'Knowing you weren't well, I ought by tights to have been coming every day,' said Aroma 'On the other hand, when you arc poorly, you need lots of peace and quiet for resting, and I was afraid that if I came too often it might disturb you.'

'Oh' I don't mind the disturbance;' said Xi-feng smiling.

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'But I realize that it isn't easy for you to get away from Master Bao. Although he has so many girls to wait on him, you are the one he really relies on. Patience tells me you are always asking her how I am; so you see, even though you can't get over here, I know that you are concerned about me.'

She asked Patience to bring a stool over and put it down beside the couch she was reclining on for Aroma to sit on. Felicity came in with some tea. Aroma inclined herself politely as she accepted it and murmured something about Felicity troubling herself.

While she was talking to Xi-feng, she noticed a junior maid go up to Patience in the outer room and quietly announce that Brightie had arrived and was waiting at the inner gate. She heard Patience answer the girl in the same guarded undertone:

'Good. Tell him to go away for a few minutes and come back later. Tell him not to hang about outside this courtyard.'

Aroma knew from this that Xi-feng must have business of some kind, so after sitting for a minute or two longer, she got up to go. Xi-feng made no attempt to stop her.

'Come again when you can,' she said. 'It does me good to talk to you.'

She summoned Patience to see Aroma out. As Aroma followed Patience through the outer room, she saw two or three junior maids waiting there, obviously scared out of their wits and looking as if they scarcely dared to breathe. Aroma passed through the courtyard gate and continued on her way back alone, wondering what could be the matter.

As soon as she had finished seeing off Aroma, Patience went in again to report to Xi-feng.

'Brightie came, but because Aroma was here, I said he was to go and wait in the front. Shall I have him called in now straight away, or shall I let him wait a bit? What do you want me to do?'

'Call him in,' said Xi-feng.

'Tell me,' said Xi-feng in the interval while they were waiting for him to arrive, 'what exactly was it you heard?'

'It was that girl I sent out lust now who actually heard it" said Patience. 'She said that while she was waiting at the inner

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gate, she heard two of the pages talking to each other on the other side of it. One of them said, "The new mistress is even prettier than the old one and ever so much better-tempered." Then she heard someone else - she thought it might have been Brightie - telling the other two *off*. "What's this 'new mistress' 'old mistress' you're talking about? You'd better keep your voices down. If anyone inside gets to hear about this, you'll have your tongues cut Out!**"'**

At this point one of the junior maids came in.

'Brightie's waiting outside, ma'am.' A chilling little laugh from Xi-feng. 'Tell him to come in.'

The little maid went outside again.

'The mistress says you are to come in.'

'Hei!'

Brightie stepped smartly inside, dropped his knee to the ground, and ended up standing stiffly to attention in the doorway leading to the inner room.

'Come here,' said Xi-feng. 'I want to talk to you.'

Brightie came into the room and stood in front of his mistress, a little to one side.

'Your master's got himself a woman outside,' said Xi-feng. 'Did you know?'

Brightie dropped his knee to the ground once more.

'I spend all my time on call at the inner gate, madam. I've no means of knowing what the master does outside.'

Xi-feng's smile was full of malice.

'Of course you wouldn't know. You wouldn't stop other people talking about if you did, would you?'

Brightie realized from this that the words he had recently been saying to the other pages must have been overheard and that it would be impossible now to deceive her. He fell on his knees to reply.

'I really don't know, madam. I just happened to hear Joker and Happy talking a lot of nonsense, so I shouted to them to be quiet; but I really couldn't tell you the exact circumstances they were talking about; I should only be making it up if I tried. You want to ask Joker, madam. When the master's here, he spends most of his time with him outside.'

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Xi-feng spat with great force.

'Black-hearted, worthless scum the lot of you! You are all in league against me, do you think I don't know? Go out and find that little pimp Joker and bring him here. And don't go away when you've done that, either. Wait here. I'll have a few questions to ask 'you when I've finished with him. – Wonderful!' she commented to herself. 'This is my trusted servant whom I employ on all my most confidential business!'

'Yes, madam. Very good, madam.'

Brightie knocked his head upon the floor, then scrambled to his feet and went off to look for Joker.

Joker was in the counting-house fooling about with some of the other pages when word came to him that he was 'wanted by Mrs Lian'. Startled, but never for a moment imagining that his master's secret had been blown, he hurried off after Brightie to Xi-feng's apartment to find out why he was wanted. When they got there, Brightie went in first.

'Joker is here, madam.'

'Bring him in!'

Even before he had seen her, the mere sound of that strident summons was enough to throw Joker's thoughts into confusion. But there was nothing for it: he had to screw up his courage and follow Brightie into

the inner room.
‘Well, my little man,’ said Xi-feng as he entered, ‘this is a fine thing you and your master have been up to! I think you had better tell me all about it.

Joker heard the words, he saw the anger in Xi-feng’s face and the terrified looks of the maids who stood motionless to left and right of her, and his legs became so weak that he sank involuntarily to his knees and began kotowing.

‘I’ve been told that this business has really nothing to do with you,’ she said. ‘Your only fault is in not having come to me and reported it. I am willing to overlook that if you tell me the truth. But woe betide you if you tell me a single word that is false! If you had a dozen heads, I should have each one of them!’

Joker rose up, trembling, to his knees:

‘What is it the master and I have done wrong that you want to know about, madam?’

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It was as though the fire that smouldered in Xi-feng had suddenly burst into flame.

‘Strike the mouth that said that!’ she shouted, beside herself.

Brightie advanced, with hand upraised, to do her bidding. ‘Not you, idiot!’ Xi-feng shouted. ‘I am asking him to strike himself. Don’t worry, I shall have you striking your own mouth too before we are finished!’

Joker, still kneeling, began opening his arms to left and right of him and bringing them forcibly together, so as to slap his hands simultaneously upon his face. Xi-feng allowed him to do this a dozen or more times before shouting to him to stop.

‘Now,’ she said’ ‘what’s all this about the “new mistress” your master has married? I suppose you are going to tell me you know nothing about it?’

Joker, gathering from this that the whole story was out, became quite desperate. Plucking his hat off he began bumping his head on the floor in a frenzy of self-abasement

‘Only spare my life, madam! I swear that every word I tell you shall be the truth.’

‘Get on with it, then!’

Joker knelt stiffly upright in order to do so.

‘I didn’t know about this business at the beginning, madam. I think it started during the time when Sir Jing’s body was still lying at the temple. Yu Lu went out there one day to ask Mr Zhen for some money and when Master Rong came back into the city to see about it, the master came with him. On their way they got talking about Mrs Zhen’s two sisters, and the master said how much he admired the new mistress - er, the other Mrs Lian, and Master Rong, be said, jolting-like -,

Xi-feng spat.

‘Turtle’s egg! What “other Mrs Lian”?’

‘Beg pardon, ma’am!’ said Joker hurriedly, and kotowed again.

When he had risen once more on his knees, he fixed his eyes miserably on the ceiling, unable to go on.

‘Well?’ said Xi-feng. ‘Is that all? Why don’t you go on?’

‘You’ll have to bear with me, madam,’ said the wretched Joker, ‘otherwise I daren’t.’

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‘Bear with you?’ said Xi-feng. ‘Bear with your mother’s arsehole! I advise you to get on with your story: it will be very much better for you if you do!’

‘Master Rong said he could arrange for the master to marry her. The master was very pleased. Then - well, I don’t know how exactly, but he did.’

The very faintest of smiles hovered briefly over Xi-feng’s face.

‘I don’t suppose you do know. No doubt if you did, it would make a very complicated story. All right, go on. What happened after that?’

‘After that Master Rong found the master a house.’

‘Oh?’ said Xi-feng sharply. ‘Where is it?’

‘A few streets behind our place,’ said Joker. ‘Not very far.’

‘So!’ Xi-feng turned and looked bard at Patience. ‘You heard that? You and I are both dead, Patience. We don’t exist any more!’

Patience dared not reply.

Joker continued his story.

‘Mr Zhen gave a lot of money to the Zhangs so that they wouldn’t object to the wedding.’

‘Now we have a Zhang family in the story,’ said Xi-feng. ‘This is getting rather complicated.’

‘Ah yes, you see, madam, the other Mrs Lian -’
Joker suddenly realized what he had said and dealt himself a slap across the mouth. Xi-feng laughed in spite of herself and the maids to right and left of her puckered up their faces and giggled. Joker thought for a bit.
‘The elder of Mrs Zhen’s two sisters
‘Yes, yes,’ said Xi-feng. ‘Get on with it! What about her?’
‘The elder of Mrs Zhen’s two sisters was engaged when she was little to someone called Zhang. I think his name is Zhang Hua. Nowadays he and his family are very poor beggars, almost. Mr Zhen promised them some money in return for breaking off the engagement.’
Xi-feng nodded, then turned to look at the maids: ‘You hear this, all of you? This is the little monster who was telling us a few minutes ago that he didn’t know anything!’

Joker continued:

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‘After that Mr Lian had the new house redecorated and she came there for the wedding.’
‘Where from?’ said Xi-feng.
‘From her mother’s place,’ said Joker.
‘Hm, I see. Was she escorted by anyone?’
‘Only Master Rong and a few maids and nannies. No one else.’
‘What about Mrs Zhen?’
‘She came along a couple of days later with some presents.’
Xi-feng laughed and turned to address Patience behind her. ‘There you are! Don’t you remember there were a couple of days when he hardly stopped praising Mrs Zhen and telling us what a wonderful person she was ?’

The smile on her face quickly vanished as she turned back again.

‘And who waits on them there? - You, of course.’ Joker hurriedly kotowed but did not attempt to reply. ‘Come to think of it,’ said Xi-feng, ‘I suppose all those times he told me he had to be away because he had business to do for our Ning-guo cousins, it was really this that he was up to.’
‘Sometimes he really was doing things for them, sometimes he was at the new house,’ said Joker.
‘Who’s living with her there?’ said Xi-feng.
‘Her mother and her younger sister - leastways, the younger sister *was* living with her, but the day before yesterday she cut her throat.’
‘Why did she do that?’ said Xi-feng.
Joker told her the whole story of San-jie and Liu Xiang-lian.
‘He was a lucky man,’ said Xi-feng when he had finished telling it. ‘I’ve no doubt that if he’d married her she would have made him a most notorious cuckold. - Have you anything else to tell me?’
‘I’ve told you all I know, madam, and every word I’ve told you is true. You can ask other people. If you find a word of a lie in what I’ve told you, you can beat me to death and I shan’t complain.’
Xi-feng bowed her head for some moments, reflecting. Eventually she looked up again and pointed her finger at him.

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‘You are a wicked little wretch and I ought by rights to kill you for imagining that you could deceive me. I suppose you thought that by deceiving me you would do that stupid master of yours a favour and your new mistress would love you for it. If it weren’t that I thought you were too frightened just now to have lied to me, I should have broken both your legs.’ Her voice rose to a shout. ‘Get up!’
Joker kotowed several times, scrambled to his feet, and retreated as far as the threshold of the outer room, not daring to leave altogether.
‘Come back!’ said Xi-feng. ‘I haven’t finished with you yet.’
Joker turned and advanced some steps and stood with his arms held stiffly at his sides and his body inclined forwards in a respectful attitude of attention.
‘What’s the hurry?’ said Xi-feng. ‘Is your new mistress waiting to give you something?’
Joker dared not look up.
‘From now on you are not to go there any more,’ said Xi-feng. ‘From now on, if I call for you at any time of any day, I shall expect you to be there straight away - and I warn you, you’d better see to it that I’m not kept waiting! All right. Be off!’
Again he withdrew. This time he got as far as the steps outside the door.
‘Joker!’
‘Madam?’ He turned back once more.
‘Off to tell the master all about it, aren’t you?’
‘Oh no, madam! I wouldn’t dare.’
‘All right, go then; but if you breathe a word of this outside, I’ll have you flayed!’
‘Yes, madam. Very good, madam.’
Joker now made his final exit.

‘Brightie!’ Xi-feng called.
‘Yes’m!’ Brightie came bounding forward.
Xi-feng opened her eyes very wide and stared at him for the length of time it would take to say two or three sentences; then finally she spoke.
‘So, Brightie. Very good. Excellent. Now go. And if any-

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one outside breathes a word about this, I shall hold you responsible.’
‘Yes’m.’
Brightie withdrew very slowly from her presence; but in his case there was no recall.
‘Pour the tea,’ said Xi-feng.
This was taken by the junior maids as a signal for them to withdraw, which they did immediately, leaving Xi-feng alone with Patience.
‘You heard all that?’ said Xi-feng. ‘That’s good.’ Patience smiled, but dared not say anything. Xi-feng appeared to be thinking, and to be growing angrier and angrier the more she thought. She lay back with her head on the pillow and gave herself up wholly to her thoughts. Presently she frowned as if an idea had just occurred to her.
‘Patience, come here.’
‘Madam?’
‘I’ve thought what to do,’ said Xi-feng. And she proceeded to tell Patience what she had planned.
But in order to know what that was, you must wait for the following chapter.

CHAPTER 68

Er-jie takes up residence
in Prospect Garden
And Xi-feng makes a disturbance
in Ning-guo House

When Jia Lian made his second expedition to Ping-an in the tenth month, he found that the Military Governor was away on a tour of inspection; and since no one seemed willing to predict when he would be back, there was obviously nothing he could do but sit in his lodgings and wait for that elusive official to turn up. It was in fact several weeks before he did, so that by the time Jia Lian had finished transacting his business and made the journey back home again, almost two months had elapsed since he set out.

But we anticipate. Let us return to the point at which we left off in the last chapter.

After hearing Joker’s revelations, Xi-feng deliberately concealed her knowledge from Jia Lian for several weeks. It was not until he had started out on his journey to Ping-an that she began putting her plan into execution.

The first thing she did was to call in the workmen - carpenters, decorators, paperers and so forth - and have the three-frame building on the east side of her and Jia Lian’s courtyard converted into a smaller replica of the main apartment. On the fourteenth of the tenth month, when the decorating and furnishing of this apartment had been completed, she went to see Grandmother Jia and Lady Wang and announced her intention of going out first thing next morning to burn incense in a certain convent-temple in the vicinity. She would take only four companions with her, she said: Patience, Felicity, Zhou Rui’s wife and Brightie’s wife. She waited until they were about to get into their carriages on the morning of the fifteenth before revealing to her companions what their actual destination was to be. They were going to

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Er-jie’s house. Xi-feng had previously given instructions to the manservants who were to accompany them that they were to be dressed in mourning and that the carriage she rode in was to have mourning trappings. This was because Er-jie, she had discovered, had not long since suffered a second and greater bereavement: old Mrs You, who had never quite recovered from the shock caused by her third daughter’s suicide, had, only two or three weeks previous to this date, taken a nap which turned out to be her last. Joker was told to lead the way, and it was he who, arriving at the house a little before the rest of the party, knocked on the gate to give the occupants warning of its coming. The Mattress came to the door. Joker had by this time resolved the problem of nomenclature to his own satisfaction:

‘Tell Mrs Er,’ he said blandly, ‘that Mrs Lian is here.’

The immortal parts of the late Droopy’s relict leaped through her cranium and described several

somersaults in the air. She rushed inside to inform her mistress. Er-jie was no less startled than her servant when she heard the message, but even in such an extremity she could do no less than receive her visitor with the expected courtesies. Adjusting her dress, therefore, she went into the front courtyard to meet her. By this time Xi-feng's carriage had arrived outside the gate and its occupants were in process of descending from it. Er-jie watched her visitor curiously as she entered the outer gate, supported by Zhou Rui's wife and Brightie's wife, one on either side. She was dressed in half-mourning, with hair-ornaments of silver and white and a spencer of some black material with a silver thread in it over the palest of pale **blue** gowns. Underneath the gown she was wearing a plain white satin skirt. Er-jie was particularly struck by her eyes:

Brows a branched twig with two high-pendant leaves, And trigon phoenix-eyes, slant, hard and bright.

And she was very beautiful:

Pretty as a peach-tree in the spring,

Even in austere autumn's dress.

Er-jie advanced to meet her as she entered the courtyard and dropped her a low curtsey, adopting, in the first words

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she uttered, the form of address that an inferior wife uses in speaking to her chief.

'Forgive me, sister, I had no idea that you were planning to favour me with an inspection or I should have gone outside to meet you.'

This was followed by another low curtsey, which Xi-feng, smiling graciously, returned. After curtseying had continued for some moments on either side, Xi-feng took Er-jie impulsively by the hand and the two young women walked hand in hand into the house. Inside, Er-jie made Xi-feng sit down in the place of honour and ordered one of the maids to bring a cushion and put it down in front of her on the floor.

'I am still very young,' she explained to Xi-feng. 'Since I first came here, everything has been decided for me by others, either my mother, when she was still with us, or my elder sister. Now that *you* have come, I hope - if you do not think me too unworthy - that you will allow me to take all my instructions from you. I promise to serve you with all the devotion of which I am capable.'

Having concluded her little speech, she knelt down on the cushion and kotowed. Xi-feng rose from the chair and bowed.

'I am as young and inexperienced as you are, sister,' she said. 'What I have done for Mr Lian has always been for his own good, as far as a silly, inexperienced woman like me could tell what that was. I begged him, as I am sure you would have done in my position, not to go sleeping out "under the willows" (you know what I mean) both for his health's sake and because I knew it would worry his parents; but Mr Lian completely misunderstood the spirit in which that advice was offered. It wouldn't have mattered so much if he'd deceived me about taking a mistress; but marrying a second wife is a very serious business. He really ought to have told me. It isn't as if I hadn't begged him to take a second wife. If he were to have a son, no matter by whom, I should stand to benefit as much as he would. It would be a support for me in my old age. But no. Mr Lian has got it firmly fixed in his mind that I am the sort of jealous woman who cannot tolerate a rival. And so he has to go off and do this without telling me. It's so unfair. Who am I to explain myself to? Only Heaven

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above knows what a great injustice he has done me. When I first got wind of your marriage about ten days ago, I realized at once that it was this mistaken notion he has about my being so jealous that had prevented him from telling me. I have waited until he is away before visiting you because I wanted this opportunity of getting to know you properly. But that is not the only purpose of my visit. I want to ask you - to entreat you - to show your understanding of my position by leaving this place and coming back with me to the mansion. Let us live together, side by side, like sisters. Let us join forces in looking after him: seeing that he performs his duties properly and takes good care of his health. Surely that is how it ought to be? Just imagine what it will be like for me if you continue living here outside. Quite apart from my feelings, think of the effect it will have on my reputation - and on yours, too, for that matter. And even if you think our reputations are unimportant, as no doubt they are, consider what the effect will be on Mr Lian's reputation, which is a far more serious matter. I expect the servants say all sorts of nasty things about me behind my back. It is their way of having their revenge on me for being strict. I suppose it is only natural. You know the proverb. The woman who runs a household is like a water butt: all the dirt washes off on her. In our household I have three lots of seniors above me and cousins and sisters-in-law both single and married in my own generation. If I were really hard to get on with, how do you think all those people would have managed to put up with me for so long? Would I have come to you today if I were such a terrible person? Many wives hearing that their husband had married another woman and was living outside with her in secret would be unwilling even to set eyes on her. Heaven knows I've tried to accommodate Mr Lian. I've even offered him my Patience as a chamber-wife. I think Heaven and Earth and the Lord Buddha must have taken pity on me in letting me know about this marriage. They didn't want me to be destroyed by a pack of scandal-mongering servants. That's why I am asking you to

come and live with me. I promise that your treatment will be exactly the same as mine in every respect: accommodation, service, clothing-allowance, every-

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thing. There is so much that an intelligent person like you could do to help me if you had a mind to. Working side by side together, we shall not only give the lie to this malicious tittle-tattle of the servants which I find so wounding; we shall also be able to show Mr Lian when he gets back how wrong he has been in making me out to be jealous. The three of us will live in perfect harmony together. And all this I shall owe to you! But if you won't come with me, I am perfectly prepared to move in here with you. Provided that you put in an occasional good word for me with Mr Lian so that I am still left some ground to stand on, I should even be willing to hold your basin and comb your hair for you and wait on you like a servant.'

She concluded this discourse by breaking into noisy weeping. Indeed, so pitiful a spectacle did she present that Er-jie herself could not help weeping with her. After further bowings and curtseyings the two women sat down together as first and second wife and Patience came forward to make Er-jie her kotow. From the superior quality of her dress and general air of refinement Er-jie could guess who she was and hurriedly rose to prevent her.

'No, no, you mustn't do that! You and I are equals.'

Xi-feng stood up, too.

'Nonsense! Let her kotow to you,' she said, laughing. 'She is only a maid. She is your maid as much as mine now and in future you must treat her as such.'

She ordered Zhou Rui's wife to take the First Meeting presents out of the bag she was carrying: four lengths of best quality dress material and four pairs of pearl and gold earrings with hair ornaments to match. There was more bowing and curtseying as Er-jie received them. The two wives sat down once more. Tea was served, and they began to talk things over as they sipped their tea. Xi-feng insisted that what had happened had chiefly come about through her own fault.

'I blame no one else,' she said. 'All I am asking for is a little sympathy.'

Er-jie was so lacking in guile herself that she had no difficulty in believing that Xi-feng was a good woman who had been slandered.

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'After all,' she told herself when she recollected the alarming things that Joker bad said about Xi-feng's character, 'servants do often revenge themselves by saying nasty things about their employers.'

And so, abandoning all caution, she began pouring her heart out unreservedly, confident that in Xi-feng she had found a friend. Confirmation of this favourable view in the form of tributes to the excellence of Xi-feng's household governance were not wanting from Mesdames Zhou and Brightie in the background.

'She puts herself out too much for other people, that's her trouble. She gets no thanks for it, though. People only complain about her the mote.'

They told Er-jie about the apartment that Xi-feng had made ready for her.

'Beautiful, Mrs Er! You wait till you've seen it!'

Er-jie longed to live with Jia Lian inside the mansion like a respectable married woman and was therefore only too willing to comply with Xi-feng's request.

'I *ought* to go back with you, sister: it is no less than my duty. But what about this place?'

'Oh, that's no problem!' said Xi-feng. 'Just get the boys to move out your boxes and bags for you. You won't be needing the furniture, you can leave that here. All you need to do is name whoever of your people is most reliable and we will get whoever it is to stay here and look after it for you.'

'Now that I've met you, I should like to leave all those sort of decisions to you,' said Er-jie hurriedly. 'I haven't been here 'very long and have no experience of running a household. I'm not able to decide things like this for myself. Why don't *you* take charge of these chests and boxes, sister? I have got hardly any things of my own. Almost everything in this place belongs to Mr Lian.'

Xi-feng told Zhou Rui's wife to make a mental note of all the movables and have them carried over later to Er-jie's new apartment. She then urged Er-jie to dress herself as quickly as possible for going out, and as soon as she was ready, walked hand in hand with her to the waiting carriage. Inside the carriage she insisted that Er-jie should sit beside her on the same seat.

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'This is rather a strait-laced household we are going into,' Xi-feng confided to Er-jie when they were alone in the carriage together. 'Neither the old lady nor Lady Wang knows a word yet about your marriage. They would probably kill Mr Lian if they found out that he had married you while he was still in mourning. There is a very large garden at the mansion which all the young people live in and which other people very seldom go into. I think when we get back it would be better if you didn't meet Their Ladyships straight away but stayed in there for a few days while I think of some way of explaining about you to them.'

'I leave all that to you, sister,' said Er-jie. 'I will do whatever you think best.'

The boys accompanying the carriage had received advance instructions not to enter the mansion by the main gate on their return journey but to go straight in at the back. Descending from the carriage on her arrival, Xi-feng, having first shooed away a knot of curious bystanders, led Er-jie through the rear entrance of Prospect Garden and took her to meet Li Wan and the girls in Sweet-rice Village.

By this time nine out of ten of the Garden's inhabitants.had heard about Jia Lian's second marriage, and when the news spread that Xi-feng was bringing the new wife into the Garden, curiosity drew numbers of them to Li Wan's place to meet her. All were impressed by her beauty and by her gentle, pleasing manner. After introducing them, Xi-feng warned each of them individually that she would kill anyone who mentioned Er-jie's presence to an outsider. The nannies and maids who worked in the Garden were all terrified of Xi-feng and knew in any case that Jia Lian's marrying a new wife in a period of family and national mourning was a very serious offence. They needed no persuading, therefore, to have as little to do with the matter as possible.

Xi-feng had a private word with Li Wan requesting her to look after Er-jie for a few days while she herself thought of some way of explaining about her to Grandmother Jia and Lady Wang. Li Wan knew that Xi-feng already had an apartment ready for Er-jie to move into at her own place and could well understand that a certain amount of secrecy had to be

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maintained about a marriage contracted when in mourning; she could not therefore refuse to give Er-jie temporary lodging.

Xi-feng took Er-jie's own maids away from her and substituted a servant of her own. She also gave secret instructions to the older women to keep an eye on Er-jie, threatening them with the direst penalties if they allowed her to stray outside or deliberately run away. Having thus disposed of Er-jie for the time being, she went off to attend to the next stage of her plans. But of that, for the moment, we will say nothing.

Everyone who knew about this affair was mystified by the strange forbearance that Xi-feng had so far shown towards her rival and could not help wondering what had come over her. Er-jie for her part, observing how well all the young people in the Garden got on together, felt thoroughly reassured about her future in the bosom of so delightful a family.

But then, after a few days had gone by, there was an unpleasant incident with Mercy, the new maid whom Xi-feng had given her in place of her own. Er-jie had run out of hair-oil and told Mercy to run over to Xi-feng's and ask her for some.

'I think you might be a bit more considerate, Mrs Er,' the maid said insolently. 'Every day of her life Mrs Lian has to dance attendance on Their Ladyships and Lady Xing, she has two or three hundred servants waiting from daybreak every morning for a word from her to tell them what to do, she has at least a dozen important matters and thirty or forty little ones to deal with every day, all the family's social contacts to attend to, from Her Grace at the Palace and princes and dukes and other high-ups down to other families like our own, thousands of taels of silver to approve the spending of - and you want to go bothering her for some hair-oil! My advice to you, madam, is to be a bit more patient. After all, your marriage to Mr Lian was rather a hole-and-corner affair, wasn't it? It's only because of Mrs Lian's unheard of generosity that you have been treated so well. A less tolerant person might have turned you out into the gutter - and not much you could have done to stop them!'

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At the end of this verbal drubbing Er-jie could only hang her head in silence. If that was what other people thought about her, minor inconveniences like the lack of hair-oil would have to be endured.

But that was not the end of it. Following this outburst, Mercy began to grow more and more careless about serving Er-jie's meals. Either they came much too early or much too late, and the food she brought consisted invariably of stale old left-overs. Er-jie once or twice tried speaking to her about it, but Mercy only glared at her and lifted her voice up in noisy self-justification. Fearing that if the others heard the shouting they would think of her as one of those vulgar, shrewish women who are always quarrelling with their servants, Er-jie felt obliged to drop the matter and put up with the hardship as best she could.

After a week or so Xi-feng came to visit her. She was all smiles and loving sympathy, 'my dear' this and 'my dear' that.

'If the servants are not giving you satisfaction, my dear, or are being insubordinate, do let me know and I shall have them beaten.'

She turned and spoke harshly to the maids and older women who were present.

'I know you lot. I know how you bully the gentle ones. It's only the hard ones like me that you are afraid of. Once out of my sight you think you can get away with murder. But take care! If I hear one word of complaint from Mrs Er, I shall have you slaughtered!'

Er-jie was impressed by the concern that Xi-feng showed for her.

'With her to stick up for me,' she thought, 'there is really no need for me to do anything myself. Servants often *are* insolent. If I speak up about this girl and get her into trouble, people will say that I lack the forbearance that a wife - especially one in my position - is always supposed to show.' And so, far from

complaining, she covered up for Mercy and the other servants and insisted that the service they gave her was satisfactory.

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All this time Brightie was making inquiries on Xi-feng's behalf into Er-jie's background. He quickly established that Er-jie had indeed been previously betrothed. Her affianced, now a young man of nineteen, was a gambler and a wastrel. After gambling his way through all his family's possessions, he had been turned out of doors by his father and now made the gambling-dens his home. The fact that his father had been to see Mrs You and received twenty taels from her in return for breaking off the engagement was still unknown to him. The name of this unpromising youth was, as Joker had said, Zhang Hua. When Brightie passed this information on to Xi-feng, she promptly wrapped twenty taels up in a packet and told him to go back and promise them to Zhang Hua if he would bring a written indictment against Jia Lian before the court. It should say that Jia Lian had, in a period of both national and private mourning and without the knowledge or consent of his parents, brought unlawful pressure to bear on the plaintiff's parents, causing them to break off an existing engagement between the plaintiff and his betrothed, and had then, setting his own wife aside in an unlawful manner, taken to wife the plaintiff's betrothed in her stead.

A strong instinct of self-preservation at first prompted Zhang Hua to refuse. When Brightie told Xi-feng this she was furious. A young idiot, she called him; a lame dog who wouldn't *allow* one to help him over the stile.

'You will have to explain it to him very carefully. Tell him he can charge this family with high treason for all I care; all I want is a pretext for making it hot for them. But tell him that if things show any sign of getting *too* hot, I am perfectly well able to cool them down again.'

Another idea occurred to her as Brightie was on the point of leaving.

'He could put y*our* name on the indictment,' she said. 'Then you could go along to the court and answer it yourself.'

She gave him careful instructions as to what in that event he should say and do, assuring him that she would be able to handle the consequences herself. Confident of her support, Brightie persuaded Zhang Hua to write out an indictment in which he himself would be named.

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‘ “Lai" is the surname,' he said. Put "Brightie Lai was principal agent of the accused." You can say that everything Mr Lian did he was put up to doing by me.'

What Brightie was now proposing seemed to Zhang Hua much less risky than what he had suggested previously, and after some preliminary discussion about the exact form that the indictment should take, he wrote it out and went along with it next morning to the Court of Censors to 'cry injury' on the steps outside. An usher came out to relieve him of it and take it inside to their lordships, and in due course the court came into session and the presiding Censor found him-self reading a bill of indictment in which a certain 'Brightie Lai, servant of the above 'appeared as chief accomplice of the accused. Under the circumstances it seemed most expedient to have 'Brightie Lai, servant of the above' summoned before the court.

Somewhat overawed by the prospect of making an arrest in Rong-guo House, the blackcoats sent one of their number ahead of them with a message; but Brightie, who was expecting the summons, intercepted the messenger and was outside in the street waiting for them when they arrived. He stepped forward and offered himself to them with a disarming smile.

'I'm afraid you have been troubled on my account, gentle-men, for I think I must be the person you have come for. Here you are: slip your chain on!'

He stretched his neck out in readiness; but the blackcoats declined.

'That's all right, brother. You just come along quietly. Nobody's going to put any chains on you!'

When Brightie arrived in the court he knelt down facing the tribunal, side by side with Zhang Hua but at a little distance away from him. The Censor ordered him to be shown the indictment, and Brightie, although he had virtually dictated it himself, affected to study it very carefully. When he had finished doing so, he handed it back again and kotowed.

'I know all about this, my lord. It's true what it says there about my master, but it wasn't really anything to do with me. Zhang Hua has only dragged me into it because he has a personal grudge against me. The person who put my master

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up to all this was someone else. Your Lordship ought to ask him about this other person.'

It was Zhang Hua's turn now to kotow.

There *is* another person involved, my lord, but I didn't dare to accuse him, so I put one of the servants' names instead.'

Brightie pretended to be indignant.

'Tell his lordship who it is, you fool! This is a court of law we are in and one of the Emperor's judges you are speaking to. You've got to tell him the name of the person, no matter who it is.

Zhang Hua admitted that Jia Rong was the person in question, whereupon the Censor, very much against his inclination, had to issue a summons for Jia Rong.

Xi-feng had secretly sent her page Cheerful to the court to see if the case was going forward. When he came back to her with this news, she hastily sent for a member of her father's household called Wang Xin, explained to him what had been happening, and told him to see the Censor on her behalf. He was to persuade the Censor to give Jia Rong a good scare, but not to proceed to any damaging judgement against him. She also gave him three hundred taels with which to strengthen his persuasion.

That night Wang Xin saw the Censor in his private chambers and obligingly supplied him with a little 'background information' to the case. The Censor had a pretty good idea of what was expected of him. He took the proffered bribe with out demur and agreed that at the next hearing it would almost certainly be discovered that Zhang Hua was a thoroughly worthless character who had brought these trumped-up charges against the Jias because he owed them money and could not pay it back.

Wang Xin also obtained a brief interview with the President of the Court of Censors at his private residence. The President was an old friend of Xi-feng's uncle, Wang Zi-teng. He had observed that the defendants in this case were all members of the Jia family and was most anxious that it should be disposed of as expeditiously and with as little fuss as possible. He had made no recommendation for special action against the defen-

dants as holders of commissions under the Crown, but merely confirmed what the Censor of the day had already decided: that Jia Rong should be summoned and should be required to answer the indictment.

By this time Xi-feng's discovery and Er-jie's removal into Prospect Garden were already known about in Ning-guo House, and Jia Rong and his father were anxiously discussing this latest development in Jia Lian's affairs when someone arrived to give warning of the impending summons and urge them to think quickly what they would do. Jia Rong, who had gone into the front part of the mansion to receive the messenger, came rushing back in a panic to tell his father.

'The man has an infernal nerve!' said Cousin Zhen. 'I thought I'd taken sufficient precautions against anything like this happening.'

He sealed two hundred taels up in a packet and sent it as a sweetener to the Censor. At the same time he ordered one of his senior domestics to go and answer the summons. He and Jia Rong were still discussing this new crisis when a cry went up that 'Mrs Lian of Rong-guo House' had arrived. This was a most unpleasant surprise. Father and son both attempted to make a getaway, but Xi-feng was already inside the courtyard before they could disappear.

'Ah, the head of the family!' she called after the elder of the two retreating backs. 'You've been putting your cousin up to some nice tricks lately, haven't you?'

Jia Rong, as a junior, was obliged to go back and greet her. She seized him by the hand and marched on, with him in tow, towards the interior of the mansion.

'Take good care of your aunt, Rong,' Cousin Zhen called out after them. 'Tell them to slaughter some fresh meat for her dinner.'

He called for his horse and went off to hide himself elsewhere.

Xi-feng walked through into the main sitting-room inside. You-shi came out of the inner room to greet her.

'What is it, Feng?' she asked, observing Xi-feng's ugly expression. 'Something has upset you.'

Xi-feng spat in her face.

'Nobody else wanted that precious sister of yours, so you had to foist her onto our family. Anyone would think all the other men in the world had died and only our Jia ones were left! But even if you'd set your heart on marrying her to a Jia, at least you might have done it properly, with go-betweens and witnesses and everything open and above-board. At least we should all have known where we were then and been able to keep up some sort of appearances. I can't think what could have come over you. Was it some phlegm that got into your heart? Was it rouge you'd swallowed, clogging up your thinking-tubes? Just what was it that made you think you could marry her to him at a time like that - a time when he was in *double* mourning: state mourning and family mourning? Now, thanks to you, we've got someone suing us: so even the people in the law-courts know what a jealous shrew I am and I have to sit by as helpless as a crab with no legs while total strangers discuss my character and wonder why my husband doesn't divorce me. What have I done wrong since I came to this place that

you should want to treat me like this? Is it something that Grandma or Aunt Wang said that has made you set this trap for me, to get me out of the way? Let's go to court together, the two of us, and state our cases; and after that, let's come back here and ask for a family council so that we can have it all out into the open, face to face. You can give me a bill of divorce then if you want to, and I shall go back to my own people.'

She began to cry noisily, tugging at You-shi's arm and insisting that she should go with her to court. Jia Rong, in a desperate attempt to dissuade her, threw himself down on his knees and knocked his head repeatedly on the floor, entreating his aunt to 'control her rage'. Xi-feng let go of You-shi and rounded savagely on Jia Rong.

'Black-hearted villain! May God's lightning strike you and the devils tear your carcase! You're as stupid as mud, and yet you are forever meddling and interfering in what doesn't concern you, forever busybodying away at your dirty, scoundrelly little plots that in the end will ruin your family and destroy the lot of us. Nobody wants you - even the ghosts won't want you when you die, your own mother's ghost or

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the ghosts of your ancestors. Don't you *dare* tell me what I ought to do!'

And she began beating him. Jia Rong redoubled the frequency of his kotows.

'Please, auntie, please! Don't give way to anger. Don't think only of what has just happened: try to remember the good things as well as the bad. I may be very wicked, but surely in a thousand days there must have been one day when I was good! I know you have every reason to be angry with me, but there is no need for you to punish me yourself. I will gladly do it for you if it will help you to overcome your anger.'

He spread his arms out to left and right of him and began to deal himself hefty slaps upon both cheeks, prefacing each blow with an interrogation, thus:

'Are you going to go on doing these stupid, meddlesome things in future?' *(slap!)*

'Are you going to go on listening to Uncle instead of doing what Auntie tells you?' *(slap!)*

'How can you bear to be so cruel and unnatural to Auntie, when Auntie has always been so good and kind to you?' *(slap!)*

The others felt like telling him to stop playing the fool. They also felt like laughing, but did not dare to. Xi-feng threw herself upon You-shi's bosom, weeping and wailing in a fine display of histrionic grief.

'I don't mind your finding him another wife, but why was it necessary to make him break the law? Why did you let him do it without his father knowing? And why did you have to destroy my reputation while you were about it? You and I must go to the court together before the blackcoats come here and arrest us. After that we can go next door and have it all out in front of Grandmother Jia and Lady Wang and all the rest of the clan. If it’s ound that I am an undutiful wife who refuses to let her husband take a concubine, you can give me a bill of divorce and I shall leave without a murmur. As a matter of fact I have invited your sister here myself. I haven't dared tell Grandmother and Lady Wang about her yet because I was afraid they would be angry. At the moment she is living in the Garden, like a princess, with nothing but the best to eat and servants to wait on her hand and foot every minute

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of the day. Meanwhile I've been getting an apartment ready for her at home which will be exactly the same as my own. I'd been meaning to move her in there as soon as Grandmother had been told about her. I was prepared to live in peace and harmony with her and Lian and to let bygones be bygones. But now it turns out that all the time she was betrothed to somebody else! What a mess you've made of things! Of course, I knew nothing about *this* before. When they told me yesterday that I was being sued, I was panic-stricken. I knew that even if I appeared in court to answer the charge myself, it was the Jia family that would be disgraced. So I'm afraid I took five hundred taels of Lady Wang's money without telling her, to bribe the Censor with. And even after that, he still has my servant there in custody.'

All this was spoken not as continuous discourse but punctuated by fits of weeping. In her final outburst the weeping turned almost into a scream as she began invoking her parents and her ancestors and threatening to hang or drown herself or batter her brains out against a wall. You-shi, whom all this time she had not let go of, was so mauled and crumpled that she was beginning to take on some of the aspects of a piece of well-kneaded dough and various parts of her clothing had become damp and discoloured with the moisture from Xi-feng's eyes and nose. As there was nothing much she could say in answer to Xi-feng, she shouted at Jia Rong instead.

'Stupid little fool! A fine mess you and your rather have made of things between y9ul I said at the time that no good would come of this.’

Xi-feng took You-shi's head in both her hands and, drawing her face close to her own, pretended to inspect the

inside of her mouth.
'Who's stupid? There isn't an aubergine in here. I see no sign of a gag. Why couldn't you have come and told me? If you had told me about it at the time, none of this would ever have happened. But no, you have to wait until it has got into the law-courts and the whole household is in an uproar, and now you start blaming them! There's a very old saying: "A good lining gives. a garment strength and a husband with a

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good wife has few calamities." If you'd been a good wife to Zhen, he and the others would never have got up to this mischief. You haven't the wit to k anything useful; and as for *saying* - for all the good sense that ever comes out of your mouth you might as well be a bottle! You seem to think that you have only got to sit tight and do nothing and people will praise you for your virtue!'

She spat two or three times in quick succession.
'I did try" said You-shi tearfully. 'The others here will tell you, *if* you don't believe me. I tried very hard to dissuade them. It's not my fault that they wouldn't listen. What *was* I supposed to do? But I don't blame you for being angry. It's just one more thing that I shall have to bear.'
All the Ning-guo concubines, maids and womenservants were by now silently entreating for their mistress, so that the room seemed suddenly to have filled with row upon row of kneeling figures. The most senior of the servants now smilingly addressed Xi-feng on her mistress's behalf.
'You're generally such a wise, understanding person, Mrs Lian: even though our mistress is at fault, you ought not to be too hard. on her - leastways, not in front of us servants. You and our mistress have always been such good friends. Leave her a bit of face now, please!'
She handed her a cup of tea, but Xi-feng dashed it to the floor. After a bit she did, however, stop crying and rolled up her hair, which had come undone. But the tone in which she addressed Jia Rong was still an angry one.
'Go and fetch your father. There's something I want to ask him to his face. I want to ask him about this new rule which says that a man may marry when he is in mourning, barely thirty-five days after his uncle's death. It's something I've never heard of before. I should like him to tell me about it so that I shall be able to teach it to the younger generation.'
Jia Rong kotowed and remained upon his knees.
'This business had nothing to do with either of my parents,' he said, 'I was the one who put Uncle up to it. I don't know what came over me; I must have been out of my mind. My rather knows nothing about it. If you insist on having it out with him, he will undoubtedly kill me. I'd rather you punished

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me yourself - in fact, I should welcome it. As for the lawsuit, I'm quite incapable of handling a big thing like that myself. One "bides a broken arm inside one's sleeve": surely you, of all people, know that, Auntie? You've got a very silly nephew, I'm afraid, and he has done a very silly thing. There's nothing for it, you will just have to deal with the matter for us, as you would if your cat or your dog had done something naughty and you had to clear up after it. Imagine you had a good-for-nothing son like me who had got himself into terrible trouble: wouldn't you still go on caring for him, in spite of all the suffering he had caused you?'

He concluded by kotowing again and looked as if he might go on doing so indefinitely. His pathetic abjectness soon melted Xi-feng; but she could not change her tune too abruptly when there were so many pairs of eyes watching her. She did not answer him, therefore, but merely raised him up with a sigh and, wiping her eyes, addressed herself once more to You-shi.

'You must forgive me, kinswoman. It's because I am so young and inexperienced. When I heard that there was someone suing us, I simply lost my head. That's why I have been behaving so badly. As Rong says, "One hides a broken arm inside one's sleeve": I must ask you to forget all those nasty things I was saying just now and have a word with Zhen on my behalf to see if he can't get this lawsuit settled out of court.'

'Certainly.'

'Of course.'

In their eagerness to reassure her, You-shi and Jia Rong answered her simultaneously.
'Whatever happens, Auntie,' said Jia Rong, 'I promise you that Uncle Lian won't be involved. You mentioned just now that you had already had to spend five hundred taels on this case. Mother and I will certainly find some way of making that good. We can't possibly allow you to be out of pocket because of this. That would be unthinkable. We must ask one thing of you, though. Do, please, cover up for us at the other house. Please don't let Grandma and Lady Wang get to know about this!'

Xi-feng answered him scornfully.

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'You were willing enough to go over my head when you planned this thing in the first place. Now that it's

gone wrong and you need someone to cover up for you, you've decided that you need me after all. I may be stupid, but I'm not that stupid I' Again she ignored him and addressed herself to Youshi. 'Your Cousin Lian is my husband, don't forget. You all say that you acted as you did out of your concern that he should have an heir. Well, don't you think I share in that concern myself? I look on your sister as if she were my own. I was so happy when I first heard about her and Lian that I couldn't sleep all night. I wanted the servants to start decorating a room for her immediately, so that I could have her to come and live with us. But you know what servants are. They told me I was too hasty and that I ought to tell Grandmother and Lady Wang first. I certainly wasn't going to take that advice, and I threatened them with all sorts of pains and penalties if they said anything about it to anyone themselves. Unfortunately my threatening was of no avail. Just as I thought I'd succeeded in hushing the matter up, the very worst thing happened: a person called Zhang Hua suddenly popped up out of nowhere and brought a lawsuit against us. I was so scared that for two nights I didn't sleep a wink. I didn't dare tell anyone else about it. All I could do was to get the servants to try to find out who this Zhang Hua was and what it was that had made him so bold. After two days investigating they came back and told me. It seems that he is a thoroughly worthless character - a down-and-out. "Mrs Er is this man's betrothed," they said. "At the present moment he is so hard up that sooner than die of hunger and cold, he is prepared to do almost anything. This lawsuit is simply a last desperate attempt to make some money. He reckons that even if he dies in the attempt it will be a better death than starving. Anyway," they said, "you can hardly blame him for trying. The master really *has* been a bit hasty: marrying during a period of national mourning is one offence; marrying in a period of family mourning is another; marrying without parental consent is a third; and marrying bigamously is a fourth. They say that the man sentenced to death by a thousand cuts will dare to pull the Emperor off his horse. A man like this Zhang

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Hua who is crazed by poverty will do anything. With such good arguments in his favour, he'd be a fool not to sue!" Well now, I ask you! Even if I'd been a forensic genius, which I'm not, hearing them say that would have been enough to shut me up. What could I do? Lian was away. There was no one at hand to advise me. All I could think of was to try and buy him off. But the trouble is, the more you give to people like that, the more they twist the knife in you and think up more and more pretexts for getting money out of you. And I am like a boil on a mouse's tail: there's a limit to what can be squeezed out of me. It was because I was feeling so desperate that I-'

'Don't worry about the money,' You-shi and Jia Rong both chimed in, not waiting for her to finish. 'That's something we can certainly take care of for you.'

'If Zhang Hua is only suing because he wants money,' said Jia Rong, 'I think I can now see what to do. We must promise him money on condition that he will admit that the charges he brought against us were false ones. Of course, we shall have to spend a bit of money to see that he isn't too heavily proceeded against; but once the case has been dismissed and he has been released, all we have to do is give him the money we promised, and that should be the end of it.'

Xi-feng tutted and looked amused.

'Brilliant! No wonder you made such a mess of your match-making if this is the way you go about things! I always thought that you were intelligent, but I see now that I was wrong. If we do as you suggest, he will pretend to agree, the case will be called off, and that will appear to be the end of it. But don't you see, if you put money into the hand of a fellow like that, he will get through it in about four or five days and then think up some other villainy as a means of getting more? Even though we have nothing to fear from him, he will still be a constant source of worry. What you propose in any case plays straight into his hands, because it enables him to say that we must have something to be ashamed of or we wouldn't be offering him money.'

Jia Rong was a sharp young man and quickly saw what his aunt was driving at.

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'I've got another idea,' he said, 'Perhaps I should be the one to dear this mess up alter all, since I am the one who got us into it I shall ask Zhang Hua straight out what his intentions are. Is it definitely Aunt Er he wants, or is he willing to make do with someone else if we will give him the money? If it is definitely Aunt Er and no one else will do, I shall simply have to break it to her that she must go and join him.'

'That's all very well, but I don't want to part with your Aunt Er,' said Xi-feng hurriedly. 'In fact, I refuse to hear of it. Even suppose she were willing, what would people think of us if we allowed her to go? No, I think we must keep her, even if it means giving him more money.'

Jia Rong knew perfectly well that although Xi-feng said this, she was secretly longing to get rid of Er-jie and was merely anxious that if she did so it should be with her reputation for womanly virtue untarnished. He deemed it safest not to dispute with her, however, but merely to agree with everything she said.

'This outside part of the business should not be too hard to settle,' said Xi-feng. 'In the long run it's here at home that we are going to have the difficulty. Hadn't you better come with me to explain all about this to Grandmother and Lady Wang?'

This threw You-shi into another panic. She seized Xi-feng by the hand and earnestly entreated-her to think of some lie which would obviate this necessity.

‘If you are not capable of dealing with the consequences, you ought not to do these things in the first place,’ said Xi-feng coldly. ‘Really! It quite disgusts me to hear you bleat like this! Oh well. I wasn’t going to help you out of this fix, but I am such a weak, soft-hearted creature. I suppose I shall have to. You’d better stay out of this, then. I’ll take your sister on my own to make her kotow to Grandmother and the ladies. I shall say that this is your sister and that I have taken a great fancy to her. I shall tell them that because I haven’t so far managed to give Lian a son, I had been thinking of buying two girls to serve him as chamber-wives, but that since seeing your sister I had thought how much nicer it would be to have her instead as his Number Two and keep it all inside the

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family. Then I shall say that since her mother and sister died she has been living in very reduced circumstances and would have found it impossible to hold out on her own until the end of the hundred days mourning, so I have taken it upon myself to invite her here to live with us. I shall tell them that I’ve already had a room made ready for her and would like her to move in there as a temporary measure until the mourning period is over and she is allowed to sleep with Lian. All lies, of course, but I am sufficiently brazen to get away with them. Even if there is any trouble, I promise that it shan’t come near you. Well, what about it? Do you think that will do?’

You-shi and Jia Rong were all smiles.

‘Very handsome of you, and very resourceful, too. But then you always were both of those things. When this affair is safely out of the way, we shall come round and make you a kotow.’

‘Fiddlestick! I don’t want your kotows,’ said Xi-feng. ‘She pointed her finger at Jia Rong. I know you now for what you are.’

Her face reddened as she said this, and for a moment she seemed on the point of tears. Jia Rong put on his most winning smile.

‘Come on now, forgive and forget, won’t you, just this once?’

He knelt once more, but she turned her head away and ignored him. He got to his feet again, still smiling.

You-shi made the servants bring a basin of water and a vanity-box, so that. Xi-feng could wash her face and hands and comb her hair, and gave orders to hurry on the dinner. Xi-feng insisted that she must go back, but You-shi was equally insistent that she should stay and eat with them.

‘If you go off now like this, how shall we ever have the face to visit you at your place in the future?’

Jia Rong added his own smiling persuasion.

‘Come on, Auntie! I promise that in future I shall serve you as a truly devoted nephew, strike me dead if I don’t!’

Xi-feng gave him a look.

‘Pshaw! Who believes -?’

But she did not finish.

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The maids and old women had been busy meanwhile laying the table. You-shi made a selection from the dishes with her own chopsticks to put on Xi-feng’s plate and Jia Rong knelt down beside her and offered her a cupful of wine. When Xi-feng and You-shi had eaten, a maid served them with tea to rinse their mouths with and then with a better tea to drink. After a couple of sips of the latter, Xi-feng rose to go. Jia Rong saw her all the way back to her own place.

As soon as she was back, Xi-feng went into the Garden to tell Er-jie about these latest developments. She told her how worried she had been when she heard about the lawsuit, and what she had found out as a result of her inquiries. Then she explained what had to be done now in order to ensure that none of the others got into trouble.

But if you want to know how Xi-feng’s plan turned out in the event, you will have to read the following chapter.

CHAPTER 69

A scheming woman kills
with a borrowed knife
And one who has ceased to hope
swallows gold and dies

Er-jie was full of gratitude when she heard what Xi-feng was planning to do for her and

gladly accompanied her to the inner mansion. You-shi, feeling that - in spite of what had been agreed - she could hardly stay away when her own step-sister was being formally presented to the family, went along with them, on the express understanding that she herself would say nothing and that, in the event of there being any opposition, Xi-feng would take sole responsibility.

When the three of them arrived in Grandmother Jia's apartment, the old lady was talking to Bao-yu and the girls -such conversations, enlivened by much joking and laughter, being nowadays her principal source of amusement. Seeing. Xi-feng come in accompanied by a beautiful young woman, she screwed up her eyes and peered at the latter with curiosity.

'Well now, who is this charming young person?'

'Have a good look, Grandma,' said Xi-feng, taking Er-jie by the hand and drawing her forwards. 'Tell me what you think of her. - Quick, make your kotow!' she whispered to Er-jie. 'This is Lian's grandmother.'

When Er-jie had completed her obeisance, Xi-feng pointed to each of the cousins in turn and told her their names.

'You can make your curtseys to them later, after you have been to see Their Ladyships,' she said.

Er-lie had to greet each of the cousins by name, as if she were meeting them for the first time. After that she stood, with head demurely lowered, to one side.

Having studied her face for some moments, Grandmother Jia raised her head to think, but presently gave up with a laugh.

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'It's no good,' she said. 'I can't think who it is. But I'm sure I've seen her somewhere else before.'

'Never mind about that, Grandma,' said Xi-feng laughing. 'Just tell me what you think of her. Is she prettier than me?'

Grandmother Jia put on a pair of spectacles.

'Bring the child a little closer,' she told Faithful and Amber. 'Let me have a look at her skin.'

Amid suppressed titters from the others present, Er-jie was hustled forward. Grandmother Jia looked her up and down very carefully.

'Hold her hand out,' she said to Amber. 'Let me look at her hand.'

When the hand had been inspected, Grandmother Jia took off her spectacles and laughed.

'Flawless. Yes, she's prettier than you.'

Xi-feng laughed too, then, kneeling down, proceeded to repeat, more or less word for word, what she had told You-shi she would say.

'Will you be very kind and let her stay here, Grandma? She wouldn't begin living with Lian until next year, when she is out of mourning.'

'Yes, that's perfectly all right,' said Grandmother Jia. 'Very good of you to have suggested it. I'm very glad. Provided, as you say, that she and Lian don't start sleeping together until next year.'

Xi-feng kotowed. Then she asked Grandmother Jia if she would mind deputing two of her women to take Er-jie round to see Lady Xing and Lady Wang, and whether it would be all right for them to say that Er-jie was being installed on Grandmother Jia's initiative. The old lady consented and Er-jie was led off to see the other ladies. Xi-feng's failure to take adequate steps for procuring her husband an heir had for some time now been a source of anxiety to Lady Wang, for she knew that her niece's reputation must be suffering as a consequence. She was therefore delighted, when Er-jie was presented to her as Jia Lian's new concubine, to learn that it was Xi-feng herself who was responsible for the arrangements. Now that Er-jie's union with Jia Lian had been brought into the open, it was possible to move her from the Garden into the

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apartment in Xi-feng's courtyard that had been prepared for her.

Meanwhile Xi-feng's agents were secretly inciting Zhang Hua to claim his affianced wife, promising that she would come to him with a generous trousseau and that they would give him a substantial sum of money to set up house with. It was no easy task persuading him, since from the very start he had had little stomach for this case. His apprehensions seemed justified when, in answer to the summons, Jia Rong's representative eventually appeared in court and made the following statement:

'Zhang Hua had already broken off his engagement with the young lady before she entered our house. She did so, in any case, merely as a kinswoman, already related to the family by her sister's marriage. There was never any talk of forcing her into matrimony. Zhang Hua trumped up this case against my master because my master was attempting to recover some money owing to him which Zhang Hua was unable to pay.'

The Censor, whose past connections with both the Jia and Wang families, not to mention the substantial bribe he had pocketed only the night before, inclined him to accept this as a reliable version of the facts, ruled that Zhang Hua was a person of untrustworthy character, driven by destitution to make a number of malicious and defamatory accusations against the defendants, none of which could be substantiated. The charges in the indictment were dismissed and Zhang Hua was sentenced to be flogged and driven from the court. By distributing money in the right quarters, Cheerful was able to ensure that the flogging administered was a light one and got to

work again on Zhang Hua as soon as it was over.
'There's no question you *were* betrothed to this girl. If you go back and tell them that it's the girl you want and nothing else, they're sure to give judgement in your favour.'
Zhang Hua was induced to do this and the court, after further persuasions from Wang Xin, did in fact give judgement in his favour.
'Zhang Hua is to repay the full amount owed by him to the Jia family within the period specified. But provided that he does so, his affianced wife is to be restored to him as soon as he is in a position to receive her.'
This judgement was confirmed in the presence of Zhang

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Hua's father, who was specially summoned to the Court of Censors to hear it. When Cheerful explained to the old man that this meant that he and his son were to get not only the promised money but also Er-jie and her trousseau as well, he was naturally delighted and at once went along to the Jia mansion to claim the bride. Xi-feng went in feigned alarm to report this latest development to Grandm6ther Jia.
'It's all the fault of Cousin Zhen's wife,' she said. 'It seems that the Zhang family had never agreed to break off this earlier engagement, and now they have sued us and the court has given judgement against us.'
Grandmother Jia summoned You-shi from the other mansion and rebuked her for her carelessness.
'It seems that your sister's betrothal before she was born to this Zhang person was never properly broken off, and now his family are suing us. I can't imagine what you thought you were at when you made this arrangement!'
'But it was broken off,' You-shi protested. 'They even took our money.'
'When Zhang Hua was giving evidence, he said he'd never seen any money,' Xi-feng chipped in. 'He said no one had ever approached him about breaking off the engagement. His father said your step-mother mentioned something about breaking it off but there was nothing final. He said that when your step-mother died, you moved your sister in regardless and married her to Lian as his Number Two. No one present at the time was able to refute those statements, so they were able to get away with them. It's a good job Lian hasn't slept with the girl yet. As far as that goes, there is nothing to stop her going back to Zhang. The only thing is, it would be a frightful loss of face for us to let her go again having once moved her in.'
'Yes, but as you say, Lian hasn't touched her yet,' said Grandmother Jia. 'It would be even worse for our reputation to hold on to someone who by rights is somebody else's wife. Much better hand her over to him. We can easily find someone else for Lian.'
'The engagement really was broken off,' said Er-jie, and named the date on which it had occurred. 'My mother gave the Zhangs twenty taels for doing it. It must be because they

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are so hard up that they have brought this case against you. The things they have been saying are quite untrue. My sister made no mistake.'

It only goes to show how dangerous people like this are to prov6ke,' said Grandmother Jia. 'Well, in that case, Feng, you had better go and see what you can do about it.
Whatever reluctance she may have felt, Xi-feng was obliged to say that she would. She had Jia Rong summoned to her room to talk to him about it. Jia Rong knew her feelings well enough - but after all, how could a family like the Jias really contemplate handing over one of their women to a beggar? The idea was preposterous. When he reported the conversation to his father, Cousin Zhen sent someone to have a word privately with Zhang Hua.
'Look here, you've had a lot of money out of them,' the man said. 'Why do you *have* to have the woman as well? If you insist too hard, my master is likely to start getting angry with you, and frankly I wouldn't give much for your chances if he does. Why don't you and your father go back to where you came from? With the money you've already got you'd have no difficulty in finding yourself a very nice little wife, and if you decide to go away, I can promise you some more money towards your travel expenses.'
This sounded to Zhang Hua like good advice, and after talking it over with his father, he agreed that if the money he had already received were to be made up to a total of one hundred taels, he and his father would undertake to make themselves scarce. The money was handed over, and father and son rose at four o'clock next morning to begin the journey back to their native village. As soon as he had made sure of their departure, Jia Rong went round to tell Grandmother Jia and Xi-feng.
'Zhang Hua and his father have run away. The charges in the indictment were all fabricated and they lost their nerve because they thought they were going to be found out. The court knows all the facts now but has decided not to prosecute. So that is the end of the affair.'
Xi-feng was not as put out by this as might have been expected.

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'After all,' she told herself, 'even if I *had* insisted on Zhang Hua taking her away, there was always the

possibility that Lian might get back in time to reclaim her. He would only have had to give Zhang a little money and Zhang would surely not have refused to give her back. Perhaps it's just as well that she's staying here. I have her here safely under my thumb while I think of some other way of dealing with her. But I don't like this idea of Zhang going off nobody knows where. Suppose he talks? Or suppose one day he finds some means of reopening the case? Everything I have done up to now will turn out to have been simply working towards my own downfall. Oh, I should never have put a weapon like this into somebody else's hand!'
She began to grow more and more worried and eventually thought of a plan. Calling Brightie to her she told him to find out where Zhang Hua was and procure his death, either by laying a false accusation of robbery against him and leaving it to the magistrates and yamen runners to finish him off judicially, or else by employing an assassin. Only by such root-and-branch methods, she felt, could her fears be allayed and the threat to her reputation be removed.
Brightie went off agreeing to do what she had asked, but when he got home and had time to think about it, he began to feel misgivings.
'The fellow's already gone away,' he thought. 'Surely that's the end of the matter? Why does she need to make such a great issue of it? Taking a man's life is no children's game; it's a serious business. I'll just have to humour her for the time being and think of some way out of this later.'
Having so resolved, he went into hiding for a few days before coming back and reporting to Xi-feng.
'Three days after Zhang Hua and his father ran away, somewhere near Jing-kou in the early hours of the morning Zhang Hua was knocked down and killed by a highwayman for the sake of the money he was carrying. The old man died of a heart-attack shortly afterwards in a near-by inn. There was an inquest on the bodies and both of them were buried there, where it happened.'
Xi-feng did not believe him.

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'I'll probably be sending someone to make inquiries shortly,' she said. 'If I find out that you've been lying, I'll have every tooth in your head broken.'
But in the event she did nothing and let the matter drop.

From that time onwards her demeanour towards Er-jie was affable in the extreme. No sister could have shown a greater interest in her well-being.

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A day came when Jia Lian's business was at last transacted and he was able to start on his much-delayed journey back home. On his arrival in the city he called in first at the new house in order to see Er-jie, but he found the place locked and empty with only an aged caretaker in occupation. When, in answer to his questions, the old man told him what had happened, he stamped in his stirrups with vexation; but there was no time for indulging his feelings, for he had shortly to present himself before his parents and report to them on the successful conclusion of his mission.

Jia She was for once very pleased with him and praised him for his capability. He gave him a hundred taels as a reward and a seventeen-year-old girl from his own room called Autumn as a concubine. Jia Lian kotowed to receive his presents. He felt enormously pleased with himself; but there was a slightly hang-dog expression on his face when, after he had seen Grandmother Jia and the rest, he appeared once more before his wife.
To his surprise there were none of the expected recriminations. Xi-feng seemed, indeed, to have become a different person. She came out to meet him with Er-jie at her side, confined herself to questions about his health, his stay in Ping-an and the journey back home, and made not a single reference to his deception. When the time came for him to tell her about Autumn, he was unable to prevent a certain pleased smugness from stealing over his face. At once Xi-feng ordered two of the married servants to go round in a carriage to collect her. Here was another thorn in her bosom, even before the first one had been extracted! Yet not a trace of what she felt was allowed to show itself in her expression. With the same unchanging

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smile she ordered a 'welcome home' dinner for her husband and took Autumn to make her kotows to Grandmother Jia and Lady Wang. Jia Lian privately marvelled at the extraordinary change that had come over her.

It need hardly be said that Xi-feng harboured feelings about Er-jie very different from the ones her outward show of friendliness might have suggested. Once or twice when they were alone together she confided to her (in a sisterly manner, of course) that her reputation in the family was a very unsavoury one.
'There is a nasty little story going around, my dear, that you weren't all you should have been before you were married. They say you were much too thick with Cousin Zhen. I'm afraid even Lady Jia and Lady Wang seem to have got hold of it. They are beginning to ask me why I picked someone whom no one else would have, and why I don't put you away and choose somebody more suitable. Needless to say, when I first

heard this story I was flabbergasted. I've tried to find out who started it, but I've had no success. Oh, these servants! Just as I thought I'd done something to feel proud of, I find that I've got a fish's head like this on my plate to contend with!'
Xi-feng's sympathy for Er-jie was so great that, after telling her all this a couple of times, her indignation against these anonymous traducers caused her to become quite ill; she refused all food and drink and began to spend the greater part of her time lying down in her room. The servants, with the sole exception of Patience, speculated freely about the cause of their mistress's illness, and Er-jie, though seldom named, came in for frequent criticism.
Because Autumn had been presented to Jia Lian by his father, she had a very high opinion of her own importance, showing scant respect for Patience or even for Xi-feng, let alone for a poor, unwanted creature like Er-jie, who was commonly known to have been a fallen woman before she married. When Xi-feng noticed this she was secretly pleased.
Since Xi-feng's pretended illness, she had ceased to eat with Er-jie, whose meals, on Xi-feng's Instructions, were now served to her in her own room. Invariably the food that was given her was inedible. Patience was so disgusted that she

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took to buying her things to eat with her own money, or, on the pretext of going for a walk with her in the Garden, taking her to the Garden kitchen where she could be given nourishing soups to eat under her supervision. Because it was Patience who did this, none of the other servants dared to inform against her. Unfortunately Autumn once came upon them there and, feeling no such compunction, went straight off to denounce her to Xi-feng.
'Patience is going out of her way to give you a bad name, Mrs Lian. That Er woman wastes the good food you give her and goes into the Garden with Patience every day to sneak food from the kitchen.'
Xi-feng abused Patience angrily.
'Most people keep a cat to keep down the mice for them. My cat seems to eat the chickens!'
Patience dared not answer back, and from then on kept away from Er-jie; but she secretly hated Autumn because of this.
Bao-yu and the girls were privately concerned about Er-jie. Though none of them would venture to speak out openly on her behalf, they all of them felt sorry for her. Sometimes, when no one else was about, one or other of them would get into conversation with her. Invariably she would be crying and wiping her eyes all the time they were talking to her; but she never uttered a word of complaint against Xi-feng - indeed, since Xi-feng was careful never to reveal herself in her true colours, it is hard to see what she could have complained of.
Jia Lian for his part failed to notice that anything was wrong. Since his return he had been completely taken in by Xi-feng's show of magnanimity towards her rival; and in any case he was at present somewhat preoccupied. The sight of his father's many maids and concubines had often in the past aroused libidinous feelings in him which he had perforce repressed; while on her side Autumn had often in the past, by flutterings of the eyelids and various other signals, expressed a marked interest in her master's handsome son. It may be imagined what sort of blaze was kindled in the brush-wood when two such eager bedfellows were brought together

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with full parental approval of their union. Day after day he spent in Autumn's company

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aye sporting with his new-won bride

in the words of the poet. He seemed, indeed, scarcely able to prise himself away from her. Gradually, as Autumn became more and more the only centre of his concern, his former feelings towards Er-jie began to cool.
Xi-feng detested Autumn but was glad to have her as a means of ridding herself of Er-jie. She would 'kill with a borrowed knife' - or rather she would watch the killing from a safe distance, like a traveller reclining on a mountainside who watches two tigers tearing each other to pieces in the valley below. And when Autumn had disposed of Er-jie, Xi-feng herself would take care of Autumn. Once she had settled on this strategy, she lost no opportunity, whenever she found herself alone with Autumn, of stirring her up against her rival.
'You are so young and headstrong. You ought to be more careful,' she told her. 'She *is* his second wife, after all. He is very, very fond of her. Even I have to give way to her a bit. It's suicide to go constantly provoking her in the way you do.'
This had the desired effect of releasing a stream of abuse against Er-jie, uttered in a voice that could be heard from one end of the courtyard to the other.
'You're too soft with people, Mrs Lian. I wouldn't behave so meekly if I was in your place. Where's all your

old authority gone to? You can be forgiving if you like, but if I've got a smut in my eye, I like to get it out. You just let me get at that bitch, I'll give her a piece of my mind!'
Xi-feng pretended to be too scared of Autumn to rebuke her; but Er-jie, listening in her room, spent the whole day crying and was too upset to eat. She did not dare to tell Jia Lian what the matter was when he called in to see her, and next morning, when Grandmother Jia noticed that her eyes were **red** and swollen with weeping and asked her what the matter was, she would not say.
This was just the sort of opportunity that Autumn was waiting for. 'She's very good at putting on this dying duck

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act,' she confided to Grandmother Jia and Lady Wang when Er-jie had gone. 'We get this from her all the time. It's because she hates sharing. She wishes that Mrs Lian and I were dead so that she could have Mr Lian all to herself.'
'It's possible to be *too* attractive,' said Grandmother Jia. 'They say that a jealous nature often goes with it. How contemptible to be like that, though - especially when Feng has gone out of her way to be nice to her! One can see that she has no breeding.'

From that time onwards she appeared to have taken rather a dislike to Er-jie; and the servants, when they sensed that Grandmother Jia did not like her, were only too ready to press forwards and trample on her themselves. Now indeed life for the poor young woman became a burden, only occasionally alleviated when Patience, acting behind her mistress's back and against her wishes, took up the cudgels on her behalf. How could so gentle a soul, one of those whom Nature, in the words of the poet,

did out of snow and rose-petals compound,

stand up to the barbarities to which she was now daily subjected? After suffering in silence for a month, she began to show the symptoms of an illness: there was a weakness and lassitude in her limbs which made moving them an effort; she could keep nothing down, either food or drink, and seemed to grow thinner and paler ail the time; and she could not sleep at night. One night, when she was trying to get to sleep, San-jie appeared to her, carrying the sword that she had cut her throat with.

'Sister,' she said, 'you always were a silly, weak-willed creature. I knew you would suffer for it in the end. Don't trust the honied words of that jealous woman! Outwardly she seems kind and virtuous, but she is treacherous and cunning underneath. She hates you and will never rest until she has brought about your death. If I had been alive, I would never have allowed you to move inside here; or if I had, I would never have allowed her to treat you like this. But *I* was fated to kill myself and *you* were fated to suffer here alone. That is our punishment, because in our past lives our wantonness led

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other folk astray. Sister, you must do as J tell you. Take this sword, cut off that jealous woman's head, and come with me to the tribunal of Disenchantment to await her judgement. You will die in any case, but if you do not do as I say, you will have died for nothing and no one will feel sorry for you.'
'Sister,' said Er-jie, weeping, 'my whole life has been sinful. You yourself say that my present sufferings are a punishment. Why should I add the crime of murder to my other sins?'
San-jie left her sorrowfully, and Er-jie, waking up with a start, realized that she had been dreaming.

Next time Jia Lian came to see her she had a tearful disclosure to make.

'This illness I am suffering from will not get better. It is half a year now since I came to you and already I am with child. It might be the son you want, though of course we cannot know that until it comes. If Heaven is merciful, I hope I may live long enough to bear it; but I fear I may die before, and the child with me.'

'You mustn't worry,' said Jia Lian, weeping himself. 'I'll get a first-rate doctor to cure this illness.'

He lost no time in sending for one. Unfortunately the Dr Wang of the Imperial College who had attended Grandmother Jia and other members of the family in the past was at present with the Imperial Army in the field (he had some hopes of a baronetcy on his return) and the pages sent out to summon him ended up by calling in a colleague of his called Hu Jun-rong -that same doctor, in fact, who had been called in to attend Skybright a year or two previously. After taking Er-jie's pulses he informed Jia Lian that her trouble was 'irregularity of the menses caused by anaemia'.

'But are you sure she isn't pregnant?' said Jia Lian. 'It's three months now since she had a period, and she is suffering all the time from morning-sickness.'

When he heard that, Hu Jun-rong asked the old women in attendance if he might have Er-jie's arm again. It was thrust out through the curtain and he spent a long time feeling the

pulses in it a second time.

‘It’s true that in a case of pregnancy the pulse from the

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liver would be a strong one,' he said *finally*. 'On the other hand wood in the ascendant generates fire, which can by itself cause the drying up of the menstrual fluid: so a strong liver pulse may be indicative only of an irregularity in the menses and not of pregnancy. I wonder if I might have a look at the lady's face? Before I finally decide on the right treatment, I should like to see what sort of colour she has.'

The request was an unusual one, but Jia Lian felt he had no choice but to grant it. The bed-curtains were drawn back a few inches and Er-jie thrust her head out through the slit. The vision thus presented to him seemed to deprive the doctor temporarily of his senses, so that it is doubtful whether he was able to make any observations of diagnostic value while he was goggling at it. After a moment or two the curtains were drawn to again and Jia Lian accompanied the doctor outside and once more asked him for his opinion.

'It isn't pregnancy,' said the doctor. 'There is some clotted blood which is holding back the natural discharge. The important thing is to disperse the clot and get her menstruating again.'

He wrote a prescription out and took his leave. Jia Lian sent someone to pay him and also to purchase the drugs named in his prescription. The medicine was made up, infused and taken. From about midnight Er-jie began to suffer from continuous abdominal pain, and alter what seemed hours of agony, produced a foetus already sufficiently developed to be recognizable as a male child. This was followed by continuous bleeding in the course of which she fainted away.

Jia Lian cursed Hu Jun-rong bitterly when they told him. He sent someone immediately to call another doctor. He also sent someone to look for Hu Jun-rong; but Hu Jun-rong, having got wind of what had happened, had already packed his bags and disappeared.

The new doctor was not encouraging.

'Obviously your lady's constitution was not very robust to start with. It looks to me as if in the course of her pregnancy she must have been subjected to some sort of emotional distress resulting in a congestion of the pneuma. By mistakenly attacking this with a far too drastic dispersant, I am afraid the

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previous consultant has done a lot of damage. The vital essence has been eighty or ninety per cent impaired. As things look at present, I am afraid I really cannot guarantee a cure. I propose a treatment using both liquid and solid medicines simultaneously. If you can make quite sure that she neither sees nor hears anything likely to upset her during the treatment, there might be some hope of improvement.'

Having given his diagnosis he departed, but not before writing out two prescriptions, one for an infusion and one for some pills.

Jia Lian was beside himself. He insisted that the culprit responsible for calling in Hu Jun-rong should be discovered, and had him beaten within an inch of his life. But Jia Lian's distress was as nothing compared with the transports of grief displayed by Xi-feng.

'It is beginning to look as if we are fated not to have a son,' she lamented. 'To think that a doctor's incompetence should ruin everything, just as we were so near to having one!'

She had a little 'altar to Heaven and Earth' set up on which she burned incense and in front of which she knelt down and prayed with the utmost fervency for Er-jie's recovery.

'Let me be ill instead of her,' she prayed. 'Only let You-shi's sister get well again and bear us a man-child, and I vow to spend all my remaining days in prayer and fasting.'

Jia Lian and all the others who saw her and heard her pray were filled with admiration.

While Jia Lian and Autumn were alone together, Xi-feng had all sorts of soups and invalid slops made specially for Er-jie. She even sent the characters of Er-jie's nativity to a fortune-teller to have her fortune told. The fortune-teller sent word back that Er-jie's stars were temporarily in collision with those of some other female born under the sign of the Rabbit. A rapid investigation revealed that Autumn was the only person in the household born under that sign. It was her astral influence that was harming Er-jie.

The sight of Jia Lian rushing agitatedly about, calling for doctors, ordering medicines, dispensing curses and floggings among the servants, and in general showing a most singular devotedness to Er-jie, had already caused Autumn's system to

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secrete several gallons of vinegar. Her jealous fury when she was informed that Er-jie’s illness was due to her influence and when she was urged by Xi-feng to move elsewhere for a few days in Er-jie’s interest can be imagined.

‘Who pays any attention to what those beggarly swindlers tell you?’ she said. ‘It’s all rubbish anyway. How can I have any influence on her? I have nothing to do with her.

The water in the well
And the water in the sea:
I've naught to do with you
Or you to do with me.

Precious little darling! She saw plenty of all sorts when she was living outside. She didn't suffer from any influences then, why should she start suffering from them now, I wonder? Anyway, there's something I'd like to ask her. I'd like to ask her where she got that child from. She may fool that cottoneared master of ours. As long as she gave him a child, it would be all one to him whether it was a Zhang or a Wang. But do *you* really care about that whore's brat, Mrs Lian? I'm damned if I do! What's so special about having a baby? Give me a year or ten months and I'll have one myself- *and* it won't have half the city for its father, either!'

The servants hearing her were at some pains not to laugh. It happened that Lady Xing had come over that day to pay her respects to Grandmother Jia. Autumn took the opportunity of complaining to her.

'Mr and Mrs Lian are trying to drive me out of here. I don't know which way to turn. Put in a good word for me, Your Ladyship, I beg of you!'

This led Lady Xing to give Xi-feng a severe telling-off, after which she proceeded to give a piece of her mind to Jia Lian.

'Ungrateful wretch! Whatever the girl's like, she *was* given to you by Sir She. Fancy trying to turn her out for the sake of an outsider! Have you no respect for your father at all?'

She walked off in a huff, giving him no opportunity to explain. Autumn, now thoroughly cock-a-hoop, stood outside Er-jie's window and favoured the world at large with an expanded and even more abusive version of what she had said

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earlier to Xi-feng. Er-jie, lying inside, heard every word of it, as she was meant to, and was deeply distressed.

That night, when Jia Lian and Autumn were in bed together and Xi-feng was asleep in her own room, Patience went to see Er-jie and tried to comfort her.

'You must try to get well,' she said. 'Don't take any notice of that animal.'

Er-jie clutched her hand. She was crying weakly as she replied.

'Sister, you have been so good to me, ever since I came to this place. I don't know how much unpleasantness you haven't had to put up with on my account. If I come out of this alive, I promise I shall do my best to repay your kindness. I fear I shan't, though. I shall have to try and repay you in another life.'

Patience could not help crying too.

'All these things that have happened to you - it's all my fault. I was so stupid. I always told myself that I'd never deceive my mistress, and so when I heard about you and Mr Lian living together outside, I thought I had to tell her. I never thought it would all turn out like this.'

'You're wrong to blame yourself,' said Er-jie. 'She would have found out sooner or later, even if you hadn't told her. It was only a question of time. And anyway, I *wanted* to come here. I wanted so much to be respectable. It really had nothing to do with you.'

The two young women wept a while in silence. Once more Patience tried to comfort her and urged her to get better; then, because it was long past midnight, she left her to go and get some sleep.

After Patience had gone, Er-jie lay thinking.

'This illness seems to have got its grip on me. I'm losing rather than gaining all the time. It doesn't look as if I shall ever get better. And now that I've lost the baby, there's nothing much left for me to live for. I don't *have* to put up with all this hatred and malice. Why don't I just die and get it over with? They say you can die by swallowing gold. It would be a better way of dying than hanging oneself or cutting one's throat.'

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She struggled out of bed, opened one of her boxes, and hunted out a nugget of raw gold. Then she wept a little. It was four o'clock in the morning. Summoning up all the will-power she could muster, she forced herself to swallow it. She had to hold her head back and swallow many times before it would go down; but in the end it did. Then she dressed herself hurriedly in her best clothes, put on her jewellery and ornaments, laid herself down upon the kang, and sank at once into unconsciousness.

Hearing no call from her next morning, the maids Xi-feng and Autumn having gone off to Grandmother Jia's place for their morning duty - were only too pleased to get on with their toilets undisturbed. Patience was disgusted by their callousness and reproached them bitterly.

'What you girls need is a really hard-hearted mistress - one who would curse you and beat you every day. There's a sick woman in there: can't you feel any sympathy for her at all? Even though she's so easily put upon, I'm surprised you don't show her a little consideration, if only for appearance's sake. "Everyone helps

to push over a falling wall" they say; but don't you think you carry it a bit too far?'

Shamed by her reproaches, the maids pushed open Er-jie's door and went inside to look. They found her dressed up in all her finery and stretched out dead upon the kang. Their frightened screams brought Patience running in as well. She could not help weeping out loud when she saw the cause. The other servants, too, when they remembered how sweet and gentle Er-jie had been and how unfailingly kind to her inferiors, were moved to tears by her death, but they were all so scared of Xi-feng that they dared not let her see their tears.

Soon everyone in the household had heard the news. When Jia Lian arrived he clung to the corpse and wept uncontrollably. Xi-feng made a show of weeping too and hypocritically reproached Er-jie for her 'cruelty'.

'Hard-hearted sister!' she wailed. 'How could you bear to leave me like this when you knew how much I cared for you?'

You-shi and Jia Rong also came and wept a while, after which they urged Jia Lian to cease his lamentations and begin to perform his duties. The first of these was to report Er-jie's

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death formally to Lady Wang and ask if he might lay out the body in Pear-tree Court for five days and after that move it to the Temple of the Iron Threshold. Lady Wang gave her permission, whereupon he at once sent servants to open up Pear-tree Court and make the principal room in it ready to receive the corpse.

Jia Lian did not like the idea of Er-jie's leaving the mansion for the last time by way of the rear gate and into the back streets beyond. He therefore opened up the gate in the outer wall of Pear-tree Court giving on to the passage-way between the two mansions which led into Two Dukes Street. Awnings were put up on either side of this gate to accommodate sutra-chanting monks.

A beautifully-embroidered satin pall was draped over a camp-bed and Er-jie's body laid on it and covered over with a sheet. On this it was carried by eight pages, followed by a number of married womenservants, along the foot of the inside walls and all the way to the room in Pear-tree Court which had been made ready for it. The official geomancer had been summoned and was waiting there in readiness. He lifted the coverlet back to look at Er-jie's face. She looked almost alive - if anything even more beautiful than in life. The sight provoked a fresh outburst of grief from Jia Lian. Once more he clung to her and wept.

'My poor wife!' he sobbed. 'You should never have died. I blame myself for allowing this to happen.'

Jia Rong nervously urged restraint.

'There, there, Uncle! Take it easy! She was unlucky, poor Auntie. That's all you can say about it.'

He pointed in the direction of the wall separating Pear-tree Court from the mansion. Jia Lian, understanding his meaning, lowered his voice, though he continued to reproach himself.

'I was too careless. I should have noticed what was going on.' He addressed himself to the dead woman. 'One of these days I shall get to the bottom of this and you shall be revenged.'

At last the coverlet was replaced and the geomancer made his pronouncement.

'I am assuming that she died at the end of the fifth watch. In

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that case you won't be able to take her out of here on the fifth day, I'm afraid. It will have to be either the third or the seventh. For the encoffining, the best time would be four o'clock tomorrow morning.'

'The third day is much too soon,' said Jia Lian. 'It will have to be the seventh. I couldn't keep her here much longer than that, because my uncle and my cousin are both away and I should need to have their permission; but I am planning to do much more for her when we get her to the temple outside. I'd like to keep her there for the full thirty-five days and give her a really decent funeral with a requiem and so forth at the end of it. We can take her south to Nanking and bury her in the family graveyard next year.'

The geomancer agreed to all this, wrote out the burial licence, and took his leave.

Various male kinsmen - Bao-yu was the first - came over to help Jia Lian mourn. When they had gone, he went back to his own apartment to look for Xi-feng and ask her for some money to buy timber for a coffin with and pay for the funeral.

Now Xi-feng had used her illness as a pretext for not accompanying the others to Pear-tree Court. She claimed that she had received strict instructions from Grandmother Jia and Lady Wang that until she had fully recovered she was to avoid all places connected in any way with birth, sickness or death. She refused to go into mourning for the same reason. The bar did not however prevent her from slipping out into the Garden when everyone else had gone, making her way round it between the rocks and the perimeter wall to the foot of the wall that separated it from Pear-tree Court, and eavesdropping on what was going on inside. She could not hear very much, but enough to send her scurrying back to Grandmother Jia to report on what Jia Lian was up to. Grandmother Jia was indignant.

'I never heard such nonsense! When a consumptive child dies, one just burns it and scatters the ashes. Burying her in Nanking indeed! What can the man. be thinking of? If he feels he has to do something special

for her because she was his wife, let him observe the Thirty-Five Days. But after that he

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should either have her carried out and burned or else buried in the common graveyard. Nanking, indeed!'

Xi-feng laughed.

'That's what I thought, but it wasn't for me to say.' Just then a maid arrived from Jia Lian, looking for her. 'Mr Lian's back, madam. He's waiting for you to give him some money.'

Xi-feng went back to see him.

'What's this about wanting money?' she asked him. 'Don't you know how difficult things are lately? Every month now our allowance falls short of our expenditure. I managed to raise three hundred taels yesterday to pay some of the bills with by pawning two of my gold necklaces. There's still twenty or thirty taels of that left that you can have if you like.'

She told Patience to get it out and give it to him; then, muttering something about Grandmother Jia having something more to say, she went away again, leaving Jia Lian speechless with resentment. He was obliged to go through Er-jie's drawers and cupboards looking for the savings he had entrusted to her. But someone seemed to have been through them before him, for all he could find were a few bits of broken jewellery and a few far from new silk dresses. The sight of these clothes which she had worn brought on another outburst of anguished weeping. He felt sure there was something suspicious about her death but dared not utter what he thought. He made the things up into a bundle and was apparently intending to take them outside and sell them, for he had called no servant, and when Patience saw him was carrying the bundle himself. She found the sight of him carrying it both pathetic but also a trifle ludicrous. Hurriedly abstracting a packet containing two hundred taels of miscellaneous bits and pieces of silver from one of Xi-feng's chests, she drew him into one of the side rooms where no one could see them and gave it to him.

'Psst! Not a word! And by the way, if you want to cry, you can cry as much as you like outside, but for goodness' sake don't make an exhibition of yourself here, where everyone can see you!'

'You are right,' said Jia Lian, taking the money. He handed

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her a skirt out of the bundle. 'Here, take this. It's something she often used to wear. Keep it to remember her by.'

As he was insistent, she took it from him and put it away with her things.

Now that Jia Lian had some money, he sent someone to buy timber for the coffin. Unfortunately the best planks turned out to be too expensive and the more modestly priced ones did not meet with his approval. In the end he got on his horse and insisted on going to see for himself. The outcome was that a set of planks costing five hundred taels and obtained by him on credit were delivered from the timber-merchant's that evening. The carpenters were set to work on them immediately and ordered to go on working through the night so that the coffin should be ready in time.

He ordered some of the servants to dress in mourning and keep vigil at Er-jie's side. He himself did not return to his own apartment that evening, but spent that and every other night of the seven at Pear-tree Court. Towards the end of this sojourn he was somewhat surprised to receive a summons from Grandmother Jia.

The reason for the summons will be revealed in the chapter. which follows.

CHAPTER 70

Lin Dai-yu resuscitates
the Poetry Club
And Shi Xiang-yun tries her hand
at a song lyric

Each of the seven nights following Er-jie's death were spent by Jia Lian on his own in Pear-tree Court. Throughout the whole of the seven-day period he had Buddhist monks and Taoist priests chanting arid

praying outside for her soul's repose.
At the conclusion of the last chapter we mentioned the unexpected summons which he received towards the end of this period from Grandmother Jia. It turned out to be for the sole purpose of refusing him permission to convey Er-jie's body to the family temple outside the city. This was a heavy blow, but one to which he could not but submit. He had to talk to the proprietor of the ground in which San-jie was buried and have another grave opened for Er-jie above her sister's. Apart from a few Jia males and You-shi and her daughter-in-law, the only other mourners on the day they buried her were Xi-feng's kinsman Wang Xin and his wife. Xi-feng herself would have nothing to do with the funeral and left Jia Lian to manage everything by himself.
The New Year was now approaching. Among the multitudinous duties that had now to be attended to was the necessity of finding suitable wives from among the maidservants for those of the menservants who had reached the marriageable age of twenty-five. Xi-feng consulted Grandmother Jia and Lady Wang on this subject and a lengthy discussion of it ensued. Several maids were of an age to marry, but for one reason or another had to be exempted. The first of these was Faithful, who had taken a vow to remain single all her life. Ever since the day on which she took this vow she had refused even to speak to Bao-yu and had taken to using make-up

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only sparingly, dispensing altogether with jewellery, and wearing only the very soberest clothes. The others respected her determination and did not press her to abandon it. Amber had to be exempted because she was ill. Sunset, too, since her break-up with Jia Huan, had developed an illness that seemed incurable and had to be exempted for the same reason. There remained only a few of the older maids-of-all-work from Xifeng's and Li Wan's apartments. The other maids were all too young. It was decided to allow the young menservants to seek their brides outside.
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Xi-feng's illness, necessitating their standing in for her as household managers, had for many months deprived Li Wan and Tan-chun of their leisure. That, and the multifarious duties attendant on the New Year festival, had resulted in the in-definite postponement of the Poetry Club. Now spring had come and at last there was time for a meeting. But now it was Bao-yu's condition that prevented them. Liu Xiang-lian's conversion and subsequent disappearance, San-jie's suicide, Er-jie's hounding to death by Xi-feng, the grave deterioration in Fivey's health caused by the hardships of her night's imprisonment - all these shocks and distresses following hard upon one another had eventually reduced him to a state of mental collapse. He was beginning to look and act like a half- wit and his speech was frequently disordered and nonsensical. Aroma and the other maids were frightened out of their wits. They dared not tell Grandmother Jia about it; instead they did what they could to distract him by amusing him and making him laugh.
Early one morning he woke up to the sound of laughter, peals upon peals of k from the neighbouring room. Aroma smiled at him when she saw that he was awake.
'It's Aventurin,' she said, giving Parfumee the name that Bao-yu had insisted on. 'You'd better go and rescue her. She's got Skybright and Musk holding her down and tickling her.'
Bao-yu slipped on his squirrel4ined gown and went into the outer room to look. The three girls were on the kang, their bedding still not folded and none of them yet dressed. Sky-

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> bright, wearing only a tunic of leek-**green** Hangchow silk and a pair of **red** silk drawers and with her hair hanging loose over her shoulders, knelt above Parfumee's body, straddling her as if riding a horse; Musk, wearing little but a **red** breast-binder and an old gown that she had wrapped round herself like a cloak, was tickling Parfumee under the armpits; Parfumee herself, in flower-patterned shirt, **red** trousers and **green** stockings, lay on her back drumming her heels on the kang and laughing so much that she seemed in some danger of asphyxiation.

'Two big ones against one little one,' said Bao-yu, laughing. 'I shall have to see about that!'
He got on the kang and began tickling Skybright. Skybright, being very ticklish, at once began shrieking and let go of Parfumee in order to tickle him back, which gave Parfumee the opportunity of getting on top of *her* and holding *her* down. Aroma stood watching these antics with amusement.
'Why don't you get dressed, all of you?' she said. 'It won't be so funny if you catch cold.'
At that moment Casta came in.
'Mrs Zhu thinks she left a handkerchief here last night. Have any of you seen it, please?'
'Yes,' said Swallow. 'I picked it up off the floor, but I didn't know whose it was. I've only just washed it and hung it out to dry. I'm afraid it won't be dry yet.'
Casta was greatly amused by the four figures struggling on the kang.
'You're certainly a lively lot here, larking about like this so early in the morning!'
Bao-yu disengaged himself to talk.

‘Don’t you lot ever play, then? There are enough of you.’

‘Mrs Zhu isn’t much of a one for playing,’ said Casta, ‘and she keeps a pretty tight rein on the others Miss Qin and the two Miss Lis. It’s very quiet there now that Miss Qin is sleeping over at Her Old Ladyship’s again. It will be quieter still next winter when the two Miss Lis go back to their own home. Look how quiet it’s become at Miss Bao’s place since Caltrop went back to Mr Pan. It’s as though several people had left. Poor Miss Shi is quite lost without her!’

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By coincidence it was Xiang-yun’s maid Kingfisher who walked in just at that moment. She had a message for Bao-yu.

‘Miss Shi says come quickly, Master Bao. They’ve got a very good poem for you to look at.’

‘Who have?’ said Bao-yu. ‘What sort of poem?’

‘The young ladies. They’re all together in the Drenched Blossoms Pavilion. You’ll see when you get there.’

Bao-yu rushed through his toilet and hurried outside to join them. He found Dai-yu, Bao-chai, Xiang-yun, Bao-qin and Tan-chun clustered round the sheet of paper on which the poem was written.

‘Have you only just got up?’ the girls jeered when they saw him coming. ‘We’ve all been up for hours!’

‘It’s more than a year now since our Poetry Club met,’ said one of them, ‘yet in all that time no one seems to have felt the urge to get it going again. Springtime, when everything in nature is renewing itself, seems an appropriate time for reestablishing it.’

‘Yes,’ said Xiang-yun. ‘We founded it in the autumn, which is a time of decay. Perhaps that’s why it didn’t thrive. If we re-establish it now, when everything is burgeoning, it is *bound* to flourish! And this “Flower of the Peach” is such a splendid poem: I think we ought to rename our club “The Peach-flower Club”. What do the rest of you think?’

‘I think it’s an excellent idea,’ said Bao-yu. ‘May I see the poem?’

‘Let’s all go and see Farmer Sweetrice and discuss this business of reviving the Poetry Club with her,’ said the others.

They got up in a body and began to go, Bao-yu reading the poem as he went.

The Flower of the Peach

Peach **pink** the tender flowers outside the window blow;
Peach **pink** on sleepy face the morning colours glow.
Tree-flowers outside the room and lady-flower inside:
Only a few short steps the flowery forms divide.
Slyly the conspiring wind tugs at the blind below:
Tree-flowers would peep inside if they could do so.

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Outside the window tree-flowers are blooming still;
Inside the window lady-flower looks ill.
If the flowers could understand, surely they would grieve?
The anxious wind flaps the blind against the window-sill.

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The anxious wind flaps the blind; spring crowns the courtyard trees;
Spring sights fill the lady’s eyes, but bring her heart no ease.
In her closed, untrodden court the moss grows **green** on the stones:
She leans there at the sunset hour, in the soft evening breeze.

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In the soft breeze the lady’s face is wet with many a tear.
Her silken peach-skirt billows out, the peach-trees to be near.
The peach-flowers and the peach-leaves nod in a rich array:
The leaves, against the peach-**pink**, dark emerald appear.
A thousand trees, ten thousand trees, crowding close together,
Walls and buildings everywhere in a **red** mist smother.

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Heaven's new bed-spread is burning on the dawn loom of the skies:
It's time now for sleeping lady-flower from dreams of spring to rise.
Her maid comes in with a golden bowl as she leaves her coral bed, And the peach-**pink** stain from her sleepy face the chilly water dyes.

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If with the water's rosy hue comparison be made,
Carmine tears and dewy flowers seem of the self-same shade.
Yet lady's tears and flowers in this unalike I find,
That the flowers are still and smiling, but the tears flow unallayed.
As she gazes on the smiling flowers, her tears at last grow dry;
But as they dry, the springtime ends and the flowers fade.

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The flowers fade, and an equal blight the lady's fair cheek palls.
The petals drift; she is weary; and soon the darkness falls.
A nightingale is singing a dirge for the death of spring,
And moonlight steals through the casement and dapples the silent walls.

Bao-yu uttered no word of praise when he had finished reading it, he simply went on staring stupidly at the paper, He

wanted to cry, but was ashamed that the girls should see his tears and brushed them away with a hurried movement of his hand.

'How did you get hold of this poem?' he asked them.

'First guess who wrote it,' said Bao-qin mischievously.

'River Queen,' said Bao-yu. 'Who else?'

'Really?' said Bao-qin. 'Well, as a matter of fact, *I* did.'

'I don't believe you,' said Bao-yu, smiling back at her. 'The tone of voice is entirely different from yours.'

'That just shows how little you know about poetry,' said Bao-qin. 'Not all of Du Fu's poems have the complexity of "Autumn Thoughts". He is equally capable of lines like

Rain-fattened plum-buds **crimson** splashed,

Or

The wind's **green** duckweed-trails on the water bright.'

'That's as may be,' said Bao-yu, 'but I don't believe Cousin Chai would *allow* you to write such melancholy verses. And in any case, though I am sure you have the talent to write verses like this if you wanted to, I don't believe you would want to. Cousin Lin writes like this because she has had actual experience of grief.'

The girls all laughed.

They had now reached Sweet-rice Village. Li Wan was shown the poem and - it goes without saying - was full of praise. After some discussion it was decided unanimously that the first meeting of the revived Poetry Club should be held the very next day, which as it happened, would be the second of the third month. The dub was to be renamed 'The Peach-flower Club' and Dai-yu was to be its president.

Next day, as soon as lunch was over, everyone met in the Naiad's House and began discussing the question of a subject. Dai-yu proposed that each of them should compose a

hundred couplets on ‘Peach-blossom’.

‘Don’t be ridiculous!’ said Bao-chai. ‘Even if we succeeded in writing so many, there have been such a lot of poems written on this subject in the past that we should be sure to find our-

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selves repeating what has been said before; and we couldn’t in any case do anything to equal your “Flower of the Peach”. Think of something else.’

But just at that moment a servant came in from outside and summoned them away.

‘The elder Lady Wang is here. Will you all come over to pay her your respects, please.’

So off they trooped to talk to Wang Zi-teng’s wife. They had to stay and have dinner with her and after that show her over the garden. It was lighting-up time before she went.

Next day was Tan-chun’s birthday. Yuan-chun had sent two little eunuchs well in advance of the date with her presents (various ornaments for Tan-chun’s room). There were presents from all the other members of the family as well, of course, but we will spare the reader a list. After lunch Tan-chun had to change into her most formal clothes and go around all the apartments making her kotows.

‘My poetry dub seems to have got off to rather a bad start,’ said Dai-yu ruefully. ‘I’d forgotten about her birthday. Today and tomorrow will be completely taken up with it. Even though there will be no formal birthday with players and so forth, we are sure to have to spend all day in the front with Grandmother and Aunt Wang. There’s sure not to be any time left for a meeting.’

She postponed the meeting until the fifth.

on the morning of the fifth, after lunch, while the girls stood talking with Grandmother Jia, letters from Jia Zheng arrived. Bao-yu brought them with him when he came to make his regular morning call. He opened the one addressed to his grandmother and read it out to her. Most of it was taken up with greetings and inquiries about her health, but there was also something about returning .to the capital some time in the sixth month. There were other, letters in the same packet dealing with personal or domestic matters which were opened and read by Jia Lian and Lady Wang. Everyone was of course delighted to hear that he was coming back so soon.

But once again the Poetry Club was fated to be unlucky. Not long before this date the betrothal had been announced of Wang Zi-teng’s daughter to the Marquis of Bao-ning’s son

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(the wedding to be in the fifth month) and Xi-feng had lately taken to spending three or four days in a row at the Wang residence, helping her aunt with the entertaining occasioned by this important event. As ill luck would have it, when Wang Zi-teng’s lady called to collect Xi-feng on the fifth, she insisted that all her other nephews and nieces should come too and spend the day ‘enjoying themselves’ at her place. Grandmother Jia and Lady Wang decreed that Bao-yu, Tan-chun, Dai-yu and Bao-chai should go as a representative selection. It was out of the question to object that they had better things to do; the four of the m had to go back to their own rooms and change into their most formal clothes before accompanying Wang Xi-feng and their aunt to the Wang family residence. It was lighting-up time before they returned.

As soon as he got back to **Green** Delights, Bao-yu threw himself down to rest. Aroma seized the opportunity to offer him a little serious advice. He really must try and pull himself together, she said, and apply himself whenever possible to his books, so as to be ready for his father’s return. Bao-yu did some rapid calculations on his fingers.

‘It’s a bit early for that yet,’ he said.

‘It isn’t only the books,’ said Aroma. ‘Your calligraphy is even more important. Even if you can get by on the books, what are you going to show him when he asks to see your calligraphy?’

Bao-yu smiled unconcernedly.

‘I’m always doing calligraphy. There must be masses of it. Surely you keep it for me, don’t you?’

‘Certainly we keep it for you,’ said Aroma. ‘I got it out to have a look at only yesterday, while you were away. Five hundred and sixty sheets: for all the years since you first started, that’s all you’ve got to show. If you ask me, I think that from tomorrow onwards you ought to concentrate all your energies on copying. If you could copy two or three sheets of calligraphy a day, then by the time he gets back, even though you won’t be able to show him a sheet for every day, you should have enough to get by with.’

Bao-yu heard her with some alarm. He had a look at the collected sheets himself. It was true. There simply wasn't

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enough there to convince anyone that he had been practising calligraphy every day.

'All right,' he said. 'Beginning from tomorrow, I'll write a hundred characters every morning.'

He was still discussing this when they went to bed.

Next morning, as soon as he had washed and combed his hair, he sat down at the window and began painstakingly copying *kai-shu,* characters out of a sample-book. Grandmother Jia thought he must be ill when he did not appear with the others for his duty-call, and sent someone over to inquire. Bao-yu returned with the messenger to wish her good morning and explain.

'I've been practising calligraphy,' he told her. 'That's what's made me late.'

Grandmother Jia was delighted.

'Keep it up, my boy! When you are studying or practising your calligraphy, it doesn't matter if you don't come here at all. You may tell your mother I said so.'

Bao-yu went round to Lady Wang's apartment to do so. His mother was unimpressed.

'It's too late to begin sharpening your weapons on the field of battle,' she said. 'Getting in a panic now will do you no good. Even if you work all day and all night, you won't be able to make up for all the time you have wasted. More likely all you will succeed in doing is making yourself ill.'

'I'll be all right,' said Bao-yu.

Bao-chai and Tan-chun, who happened to be present, reassured her.

'We can't memorize his texts for him,' they said, 'but we could at least help him out with his calligraphy. If each of us copied a sheet of characters for him every day to add to what he has done himself, he ought to have enough calligraphy to get by with. That's one hurdle at least he'd be over. It would save Sir Zheng from getting angry and Bao-yu from making himself ill.'

Lady Wang smiled and nodded.

When Dai-yu heard that Jia Zheng was coming home, she knew that he would be sure to ask Bao-yu about his lessons and that anything which distracted him from them would be

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merely adding to his troubles. Because of this she deliberately made no more mention of the Poetry Club, and in order that he should not suspect her real reason for dropping it, pretended that she was beginning to find the whole thing rather a bore.

Tan-chun and Bao-chai each produced a sheet of characters a day to add to his collection, and Bao-yu himself, by doubling the time he spent on calligraphy, managed to produce two hundred or sometimes as much as three hundred characters a day. By the end of the third month he had already added considerably to his stock of sheets.

One day towards the end of the month he was going over this stock and had just estimated that fifty or sixty more sheets would probably be enough, when Nightingale arrived with a roll of something from Dai-yu. on opening it out he found it to consist of several sheets~ all of the same dark-**yellow** bamboo paper, covered with tiny 'fly's-head' *kai-shu* characters which she had copied, in a hand very similar to his own, from sample-books of Zhong Yu's and Wang Xi-zhi's calligraphy. Bao-ya was so pleased that he clasped his hands and made Nightingale a bow before hurrying over to thank her mistress in person.

Shortly after that he received some more sheets of calligraphy that Xiang-yun and Bao-qin had been copying for him. Now, when he put the whole lot together, he found that, though there was nothing like a sheet a day for every day since he first started, there was already a sufficient quantity to get by with. This was a great relief. He could now forget about calligraphy for the time being and concentrate on revision. His aim was to go three or four times over each of the texts.

While he was still busily engaged in this revision, a tidal wave hit a certain part of the coast, causing damage and loss of life in a number of neighbouring communities. After reading the reports sent in by the local authorities, the Emperor issued a Rescript commanding Jia Zheng to visit the area on his way back in order to supervise relief. It now seemed unlikely that he would be able to reach home before the end of the seventh month. When he heard this, Bao-yu threw aside his books and reverted to the drifting, aimless way of life that was customary with him.

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Spring was now almost over Xiang-yun, feeling rather bored, had been watching the drifting willow-floss and amusing herself by composing a little poem about it. It was a song-lyric, in the form of a *Ru-meng-ling:*

'Not chewed-off ends of the sky's embroidery?
'What are they?' - 'Raise the blind a bit and see.'
A white hand snatches some and draws it in, Pursued by the swallows' chiding din.
Oh stay, oh stay!
The lovely spring drifts after you away.

Xiang-yun was rather pleased with her little poem and wrote it out on a slip of paper to show Bao-chai. After that she went to look for Dai-yu and showed it to her. Dai-yu read it and smiled.

'It's good. Both charming and original.'

'We've never done song-lyrics at any of our poetry meetings,' said Xiang-yun. 'Why don't you call a meeting for tomorrow and we'll all do some? It would make a nice change.'

Dai-yu was becoming infected by Xiang-yun's enthusiasm.

'It's a good idea,' she said. 'I will.'

'It's a lovely day today,' said Xiang-yun. 'Why not have the meeting today?'

'I don't see why not,' said Dai-yu.

She told the servants to prepare some suitably dainty things to eat, while a couple of them went off to summon the other cousins to the meeting. Meanwhile Dai-yu and Xiang-yun agreed that 'Willow Floss' should be the subject of the poems and decided on the stanza-patterns that they should conform to. All this was written down on a sheet of paper which was pasted up on the wall. When the cousins arrived, they first of all read the notice on the wall and then read Xiang-yun's poem. Some little time after that was devoted to praising it.

'I'm not much good at song-lyrics,' said Bao-yu, 'but I suppose I had better do what I can.'

Everyone drew lots then to see which stanza-forms they were to use. Bao-chai lit a stick of Sweet Dreams incense, and then everyone settled down to think. Dai-yu was the first to have something ready and write it down. Just as she had finished, Bao-qin began hurriedly writing hers.

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'I've thought of mine,' said Bao-chai, 'but I'd like to look at yours first before I show it to you.'

Tan-chun laughed.

'Why does the incense seem to be burning so quickly today? I've only done the first half of mine.' She turned to Bao-yu. 'How about you? Have you done yours yet?'

Bao-yu had in fact written a few lines of one, but, feeling dissatisfied with what he had written, had crossed it all out and begun again, by which time the incense had almost burned itself out.

'Bao-yu's failed to make the grade as usual,' said Li Wan, laughing. 'But what about Miss Plantain?'

Tan-chun promptly began to write down what she had composed. The others read the words as she wrote them. It was the first half of a *Nan-ge-zi* lyric.

Once in the air you start,
The creatures of the wind, the breezes' sport,
Not to be bound or held back by any art,
To north and south and east and west
You drift apart.

'Very good,' said Li Wan. 'But why don't you finish it?' Bao-yu had been willing to concede defeat. When he saw that the incense was running out, he could see no point in writing an indifferent conclusion just for the sake of finishing, and so he had laid down his brush and occupied himself instead in reading what Tan-chun had written. As he did so, he had a sudden inspiration, and picking up his brush again, quickly scribbled out a second half for it:

Your drifting fate not fear:
I understand the message that you bear.
Though orioles mourn and the flowers' end seems near,
Spring will return, but I must wait
Another year.

The girls were amused.

'You're a funny fellow. You can't do your own, yet you can do someone else's without any trouble. It's very good, but unfortunately it doesn't count.'

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They had a look at Dai-yu's poem then. It was a *Tang-duo-ling.*

The pollen is spent in the Island of Flowers;
From the House of the Swallow the perfume has fled.
The fluff-balls dance, Pursue, embrace,
Their floating lives, as our lives, quickly sped'
That, craving Beauty, Find it dead.

The creatures of nature, they too know our sorrow, Their beauty, like ours, must soon end in decay.
Our fate, like theirs, Uncertain hangs,
Wed to the wind, our bridegroom of a day, Who cares not if we
Go or stay.

The others admired it, but with reservation.

'Pity it's so gloomy,' they said. 'Still, there's no denying, it is very good.'

Then they had a look at Bao-qin's. She had written a *Xi-jiang-yue:*

In the Han palace gardens a scatter thin and slight,
But along the Sui embankment in legions falling:
Spring's three-month handiwork before the wind in flight,
A day-dream of pear-blossom on a moonlit night.

In many a courtyard petals fall through the air,
And the floss collects like fragrant snow on the casements:
In North and South the same sight is seen now everywhere;
But for the sad exile most hard to bear.

'A more virile type of melancholy,' said the others, laughing. 'Very typical! That "In many a courtyard..." couplet is good.'

'I don't agree,' said Bao-chai. 'I think it suffers from the same pessimism as Cousin Dai's. Willow floss is a light and airy thing. It seems to me that the best way to avoid the cliches that this subject invites is to give it a light and airy

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treatment. That is the principle on which I have tried to compose my poem; but you may not think I have succeeded.'

'Don't be so modest!' said the others. 'It's sure to be good. Come on, hand it over! Permit us to admire!'

It was a *Lin-jiang-xian* that she had written.

In mazy dances over the marble forecourt,
Wind-whorled, into trim fluff-balls forming –

'Bravo!' said Xiang-yun. "'Wind-whorled, into trim fluff-balls forming": that line is better than anything the rest of us have written.'

They read on.

Like fluttering moths or silent white bees swarming:
Not for us a tomb in the running waters,
Or the earth's embalming.

The filaments whence we are formed remain unchanging,
No matter what separates or unifies.
Do not, earth-child, our rootlessness despise:
When the strong wind comes he will whirl us upwards
Into the skies.

They thumped the table enthusiastically.

'Undoubtedly this poem is the best. There is a mote haunting melancholy perhaps in River Queen's poem and more liveliness and charm in Cloud Maiden's; but all in all this is far and away the best poem. This time Little Xue and Plantain Lover fail to make the grade. We shall have to think of a penalty.'

'That's fair enough,' said Bao-qin, laughing, 'but what about someone who failed to submit anything at all? What should *his* penalty be?'

'Don't worry about him,' said Li Wan. 'He will be punished too – *exemplarily!*'

Just at that moment there was a crashing noise outside the window which made them lump. It sounded as if an outer casement had somehow come unfastened and fallen into the bamboos. The maids ran outside to look. Other maids, who had been waiting outside there all the time, told them what it

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was: a large kite shaped like a butterfly which had fallen down and got caught in the tops of the bamboo.

'What a beauty!' said the maids from inside. 'I wonder whose it is. They must have cut the string. Let's try and get it down.'

'I recognize that kite,' said Bao-yu. 'It belongs to Uncle She's new girl, Carmine. Let's take it down and give it back to her.'

'There must be other kites like that besides hers,' said Nightingale. 'I think it's silly to say that it *must* be hers. Anyway, I don't care. I'm going to get it down for us.'

'How mean you are, Nightingale!' said Tan-chun. 'You've got a kite of your own already. And if you keep someone else's, aren't you afraid of catching their bad luck?'

'You're right,' said Dai-yu. 'We don't know *whose'* bad luck it mightn't be bringing us. Take it away! Let's take out *our* kite and get rid of *our* bad luck.'

Nightingale told the maids, who had by this rime succeeded in getting the kite down, to take it to the women at the gate and hand it into their keeping. If anyone came looking for it, they were to give it back to them. The other maids rushed off excitedly to fetch Dai-yu's kite. It was the kind called a 'pretty lady'. While two of them carried out the kite, one of them brought out a stool to stand on, another fastened the cross-piece to the raising-stick, and another paid the string out from the winder. Bao-chai stood with the other cousins at the gate of the courtyard, directing operations. She told the girls to fly the kite in the open ground outside the courtyard.

'This kite of yours isn't nearly as pretty as Cousin Tan's,' Bao-qin told Dai-yu. 'She has one shaped like a phoenix, with wings that move.'

'Why don't you get yours and fly it then?' Bao-chai said, turning to Tan-chun's maid Ebony.

Ebony hurried off excitedly to do so. Bao-yu, catching the enthusiasm, sent a maid off to fetch one of his own.

'Bring the big fish one that Lai Da's wife sent me yesterday,' he told the girl.

After a long time gone, the girl came back empty-handed.

'Skybright flew it yesterday and let it go.'

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'Really!' said Bao-yu. 'And I hadn't even flown it once myself.'

Tan-chun laughed.

'Never mid! At least she's got rid of your bad luck for you!'

'All right,' said Bao-yu to the girl. 'Go and fetch the big crab one.'

The girl went off and returned accompanied by two or three other maids carrying a large pretty lady kite and a winder.

'Miss Aroma says she gave the crab one to Master Huan yesterday. She says why don't you fly this one instead? It was sent to you yesterday by Mrs Lin.'

Bao-yu inspected it. The pretty lady was certainly a beautifully constructed creature. He was secretly

pleased and told the girls to fly it.
Tan-chun's kite had also arrived by now and Ebony was already standing on a little hill getting it up with the assistance of a few helpers. Bao-qin had sent for her kite, a large **red** bat, and Bao-chai, beginning to share the excitement herself, had had hers fetched too: it was a line of seven large geese flying one behind the other. Soon all the kites but one were up in the air being flown successfully. Bao-yu's pretty lady was the exception. He said it was because the maids didn't know how to do it properly and insisted on flying it himself; but after a good deal of manoeuvring he could get her no higher than the roof, and even then it was only to flop down weakly again upon the ground. Bao-yu was getting into quite a state and the perspiration stood out in beads upon his brow. The cousins all laughed. At this he became so exasperated that he picked the kite up, threw it down on the ground again, and pointed his finger at it in anger.

'If you weren't a lady, I'd stamp on you and smash you into pieces I'

Dai-yu laughed.

'The string isn't fastened on right. If you could get someone to refasten it for you properly, it would fly just as well as any other.'

Dao-yu sent someone to take the kite back for restringing

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and fetch him another pretty lady that he could fly in the mean tune.
All the cousins were now standing with their faces turned upwards, watching the kites as they soared higher and higher into the sky. A maid came round offering them all sweets. Presently there was a cry from Nightingale:

'The wind's getting stronger, Miss. Do you want to release it now?'

Dai-yu made her handkerchief into a pad for her hand and tested the tension on the string. The wind was certainly pulling it with some force. She took over the winder from Nightingale and let it run free, so that the kite could pull itself away in the wind. There was a whirring noise as the last of the string ran out.
Dai-yu asked the others if any of them would like to cut it for her.
'No, we've all got our own,' they said. 'You do yours first.'

'It's fun to see them fly away,' said Dai-yu, 'and yet it seems rather a pity.'

'But that's the main reason for flying kites,' said Li Wan, 'the pleasure of seeing them fly away. Not to mention the fact that it is supposed to get rid of your bad luck You of all people ought to let yours go, so as to get rid of your illness.'
'Come on, Miss, you've sent plenty of kites off in your time!' said Nightingale. 'Why be so stingy all of a sudden? If you won't cut it, I'll cut it for you.'
She snatched a little pair of West Ocean silver scissors out of Snowgoose's hand and snipped through the kite-string, an inch or so from the winder.
'Go away, kite!' she cried merrily. 'And take my mistress's illness with you!'
The kite began to swoop and soar. Soon it appeared no bigger than an egg. A few moments later and it was only a dot in the sky. Another moment and it had disappeared from sight altogether.
'Hurrah! Hurrah!' cried the cousins, as they watched it disappear.
'What a pity we don't know where she will land I' said Bao-yu. 'It would be nice if she landed somewhere where there are people and some little child were to find her. But suppose she

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lands in some uninhabited wilderness: how lonely she will be! I think I shall send my lady after her, to keep her company!'
He asked for the scissors and cut the string himself, and a second pretty lady went hurrying after the first one until it, too, disappeared.
Tan-chun was just about to cut the string of her phoenix when another phoenix appeared in the sky, not far from hers.
'I wonder whose that is?' said Tan-chun.
'Don't cut yours yet,' the others cried. 'It looks as if that one is going to get caught up in it.'
And that is just what happened. The other phoenix drew nearer and nearer until the two strings crossed and tangled. The maids were all for winding Tan-chun's kite in and capturing the other kite with it, but the owner of the other kite was not prepared to yield, and after a good deal of tugging and heaving on both sides, the strings finally snapped and the two phoenixes flew off companionably together. The cousins clapped their hands delightedly.
'Well, I've released my kite and now I'm tired. I think I shall go in and rest,' said Dai-yu.
'Just wait until we've released ours,' said Bao-chai, 'and then we can all go.'
So she and Xiang-yun and Bao-qin each cut their kite-strings and watched their kites fly away, after which all of cousins went back to their own apartments.

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In spite of the reprieve, Bao-yu dared not abandon his lessons altogether and continued to do a little revision or calligraphy from time to time. When he was feeling bored, he would go out to seek the company of the girls, or go round to the Naiad's House for a chat. The girls, for their part, knowing how much he was behind with his work, no longer sent anyone to invite him when they met together for poetry-reading or other diversions; and Dai-yu, in her anxiety lest he should once more incur his father's wrath, frequently feigned sleep when he went round to see her, so as not to be the cause of keeping him from his studies. Bao-yu was re-

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duced to spending more and more time in his own room, where work itself now often took the place of a diversion.

In this manner the summer gradually wore away. Autumn was just beginning when one day two of his grandmother's maids came round in a very agitated state to summon him.

The purpose of the summons and the reason for their agitation will be explained in the chapter which follows.

CHAPTER 71

Lady Xing deliberately humiliates her
Daughter-in-law
And Faithful inadvertently interrupts
a pair of love-birds

It was the news of Jia Zheng's imminent homecoming that had caused the maidservants' agitation. As an Education Officer, Jia Zheng was supposed to report on his commission as soon as he arrived and, being a very conscientious man, he would have thought it improper even to look in on his family before doing so. When, therefore, at the news of his coming, Cousin Zhen, Jia Lian and Bao-yu went out to the first poststage beyond the walls to welcome him, he merely inquired after his mother's health, bowing respectfully in her direction as he did so, and told them to go back and wait for him at home. After his interview next day with the All-highest, his mission was formally completed and he could return with a good conscience to his family. The All-highest had been graciously pleased to grant him a whole month's leave of absence in which to rest and recuperate at home.

Jia Zheng was beginning to age now, and the worries and responsibilities of office had taken their toll of his health. It was good to be back after so long an absence from those nearest and dearest to him; he was determined to relax and enjoy himself to the utmost, refused even to think about money matters or domestic responsibilities, and spent all his time reading, or, when he felt in need of company, drinking and playing Go with his literary gentlemen, or enjoying the delights of family life with his wife and mother in the women's apartments inside.

This year the third day of the eighth month was Grandmother Jia's eightieth birthday. A formidable number of people would have to be invited and there was even some doubt whether they would be able to accommodate them all.

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After discussion by the menfolk of both mansions, it was decided that there should be eight days of entertaining, beginning on the twenty-eighth of the seventh month and ending on the fifth day of the eighth on each of these days banquets would be given in both mansions: in the Ning-guo mansion for male guests and in the Rong-guo mansion for female ones. The Painted Chamber, Prospect Hall and one or two other of the larger buildings in Prospect Garden would be used as restrooms for the ladies. The programme of entertaining would be as follows: the twenty-eighth would be for Imperial kinsmen, Princes and Princesses of the Blood and their consorts, Royal Highnesses, Serene Highnesses and members of the high nobility; the twenty-ninth would be for Ministers of State and Civil and Military Governors and their wives; the thirtieth for official colleagues and their wives and members of other clans related to the Jia family by marriage; on the first of the eighth month a family party would be given by Jia She, on the second one by Jia Zheng and

on the third one by Cousin Zhen and Jia Lian; on the fourth a joint entertainment would be given by all members of the Jia clan irrespective of age and seniority; and on the fifth there would be another joint entertainment organized by Lai Da, Lin Zhi-xiao and the other senior domestics.

Ever since the beginning of the seventh month presents had been coming in almost continuously. From the highest source of all an order was received by the Board of Rites authorizing the bestowal of the following:

a ru-yi sceptre of gold and jade four lengths of tribute satin
four gold and jade cups
five hundred taels of silver from the Imperial
Treasury

Yuan-chun's gifts, which were delivered to the mansion by eunuchs, were:

a golden figurine of Old Longevity
a staff of aloeswood
a rosary of putchuk beads
a box of Fu Shou incense
a pair of golden medallions

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four pairs of silver ingots
twelve lengths of tribute satin
four jade cups

And there were presents too numerous to mention from princes and princesses and from the families of a host of civil and military officials both great and small who were on visiting terms with the Jias. Several long tables were carried into the main reception hail and covered with **red** baize and the choicest presents set out on them every day for Grandmother Jia's inspection. She went along for the first day or two and took some pleasure in examining her gifts, but soon grew tired of this and told Xi-feng to look after them for her: she would look at them herself some other day, when she had nothing better to do.

By the twenty-eighth both mansions had been hung with lanterns and festooned all over with garlands. Painted phoenixes gambolled on folding screens, embroidered lotuses blossomed on drapes and covers, and the sound of fluting and piping could be heard several streets away. The only guests that day at the Ning-guo mansion were the Prince of Bei-jing, the Prince of Nan-an, Princess Yang-chang's Consort, the Prince of Luo-shan and a number of noblemen whose families had long been on friendly terms with the Jias. At the Rong-guo mansion the guests were the Dowager Princess of Nan-an, the Prince of Bei-jing's Consort, and the ladies of the various aforementioned noblemen. Grandmother Jia and the others were dressed in full court rig to receive them. After the initial salutations were over, the visitors were conducted to Prospect Hall inside the Garden, where they took tea and 'changed their clothes'. From there they were conducted to the Hall of Exalted Felicity, where they offered formal congratulations to Grandmother Jia before finally, after much polite bowing and deferring, taking their places at the banquet. The Dowager Princess of Nan-an and the Prince of Beijing's Consort sat at the two central tables at the back of the hall; the two rows of tables arranged at right-angles to left and right of theirs were occupied in order of precedence, the Marchioness of Jin-xiang and the Countess of Lin-an heading the row upon the left, while Grandmother Jia, as hostess,

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occupied the first of the right-hand ones. Lady Xing and Lady Wang stood in attendance behind Grandmother Jia's chair, with You-shi, Xi-feng and a number of other Jia ladies fanning out to left and right behind them. Lin Zhi-xiao's wife and Lai Da's wife stood by the bamboo curtain on one side of the hail supervising the transportation of dishes and wine-kettles by a small army of serving-women, while Zhou-Rui's wife directed the waitresses from the other side of the folding screens. Meanwhile the attendants brought with them by the lady visitors were being entertained elsewhere.

Outside, on the temporary stage that had been erected in the courtyard, the players were due to begin their performance. In honour of the occasion they began by kneeling in a row at the front of it and offering their birthday congratulations to the old lady, while twelve little maids, dressed up as page-boys in identical costumes, stood solemnly to attention below the stage. When the players had finished, one of these little girl-pages advanced to the foot of the steps leading up to the hail with a playbill in her hands. She was relieved of it by a serving-woman who had been stationed there for the sole purpose of receiving and carrying messages. This woman handed it to Lin Zhi-xiao's wife, who put it on a salver, edged herself through the bamboo curtain, and carried it to Cousin Zhen's concubine, Lovey. Lovey handed it to You-shi, and You-shi walked up and offered it to the Dowager Princess of Nan-an. The Dowager Princess, after first, for politeness' sake, declining, chose one of those congratulatory pieces which are customarily performed on these occasions. The Prince of Bei-jing's Consort, whose turn it was next, did exactly the same. The rest of the ladies insisted that the players themselves should put on whatever they thought best, for it was sure to be good.

After four courses of various dishes and one of soup, the visitors attendants gave their mistresses' largesse to the players, and the ladies returned to the Garden to 'change their clothes' and sample a very special tea. The Dowager Princess of Nan-an asked Grandmother Jia about Bao-yu.

'Several temples are reading the *Immaculate Diamond* for me today,' said Grandmother Jia. 'He has gone to kneel a while in each one of them while they do the reading.'

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'And what about your granddaughters?' said the Princess. 'Oh, this one is ill and that one is weakly and the other is too shy to see anyone. They are looking after my room for me today. We have more players than we need, so I thought we might as well let them have a troupe to themselves. I expect they are at this moment sitting with their cousins and watching a play in my courtyard.'

'*Do* send for them I' said the old princess coaxingly.

Grandmother turned to where Xi-feng was standing behind her.

'Go and fetch your Cousin Shi and the two Xue girls and your Cousin Lin, will you? Oh, and you can bring your Cousin Tan with you as well.'

Xi-feng went to Grandmother Jia's place. All the girls were there, nibbling sweets and watching a play, as Grandmother Jia had said they would be. Bao-yu had just got back from his kneeling. In obedience to her message, Bao-chai, Bao-qin, Dai-yu, Tan-chun and Xiang-yun followed her back into the Garden and made their curtseys to the assembled ladies. Some of the guests had seen them before, some had not; but all alike exclaimed admiringly at their beauty. Of the five girls Xiangyun was the most familiar to those present.

'Naughty girl!' said the Dowager Princess waggishly 'You should have come yourself to see me when you heard that I was here, not waited to be called! I shall have a bone to pick with your uncle now, next time I see him!'

She took Tan-chun by one hand and Bao-chai by the other and drew them towards her.

'And how old are you girls?' she asked.

She released them, after several times commenting what 'fine girls' they were, and then subjected Dai-yu and Bao-qin to the same treatment, taking them by the hand, scrutinizing each of them in turn, and extravagantly praising their good looks.

'Dear me, they are all such lovely girls!' she said laughing. 'I really don't know which of them I prefer.'

Suitable presents had now been made ready by an attendant: five gold rings, five jade rings and five wristlets of aromatic beads.

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'Rather trifling presents I am afraid, my dears,' said the Dowager Princess. 'Perhaps you could give them to your maids.'

The five girls kotowed their thanks. There were more presents from the Prince of Bei-jing's Consort and from the other ladies present - but there is no need to enumerate them.

When they had finished their tea, the ladies walked for a while in the Garden, after which Grandmother Jia invited them to return to the banquet; but the Dowager Princess of Nan-an took her leave. 'To tell you the truth, I am not feeling very well today,' she said. 'I would not have stayed away for the world, but I am sure you will understand if I leave a little early.'

Under the circumstances, Grandmother Jia could not very well press her to stay, and after some polite skirmishing when the Princess protested that she could perfectly well find her way off the premises alone, the entire company saw her to the gate of the Garden, where she climbed into her palanquin and was carried away. The Prince of Bei-jing's Consort returned with the rest of them to the Hall of Exalted Felicity and sat with them there for some minutes, but then she too took her leave. Of the other ladies some stayed on to the end, others left when a decent interval had elapsed after the departure of the two princesses.

The day's entertaining left Grandmother Jia exhausted and next day she was unable to see anyone and stayed in her own room. Lady Xing and Lady Wang had to receive the female guests on her behalf. As for the male ones, those of them who wanted to offer their birthday congratulations had to do so in the outer reception hall. Their salutations were returned, obeisance for obeisance and bow for bow, by Jia She, Jia Zheng and Cousin Zhen, who then conducted them to the banquet prepared for them in Ning-guo House. But that is enough of banquets.

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As long as the birthday celebrations continued, You-shi did not go back to the Ning-guo mansion to sleep. During the daytime she helped the others to entertain the guests. In the

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evenings, after some time spent in Grandmother Jia's apartment chatting with the old lady, she would help

Xi-feng supervise the getting out and putting away of the porcelain, gold and silver ware and other things that had been used that day or would be on the next, and the going over and setting out on display of the most recently-arrived batch of presents. After that she would go to Li Wan's place to spend the night.

On one of these evenings she had just finished waiting on Grandmother Jia while she took her evening meal, when the old lady exempted her from further services.

'You must be tired,' she said. 'I know lam. Why don't you go and have a bite to eat yourself now and then go to bed? You will have to be up early again tomorrow.'

You-shi thanked her and went off to Xi-feng's room hoping for some supper. Xi-feng was in the upstairs storage-room, however, supervising the putting away of some screens that had just arrived. Only Patience was at home, folding up some of Xi-feng's clothes. Remembering Patience's many kindnesses to Er-jie while she was still alive, You-shi nodded her head sympathetically.

'You are a good-hearted girl, Patience. I am afraid you have a great deal to put up with.'

Patience's eyes reddened, but she forbore to say anything. You-shi asked her if Xi-feng had eaten yet. Patience smiled.

'She wouldn't eat without first asking you,' she said.

'In that case I'll go and look for a bite elsewhere,' said You-shi. 'I don't know why, but I'm absolutely ravenous.'

'Don't go!' said Patience. 'We've got some mince rolls. Why not make do with one or two of those now and have supper with Mrs Lian when she gets back?'

'No, I can see you're busy,' said You-shi. 'I think I shall go into the Garden to see the girls.'

Since she obviously wanted to go, Patience made no further effort to detain her.

When You-shi came to the Garden she found the main gate and all the side gates still open and blazing with lights. Turning to the maid who accompanied her, she told her to go and fetch one of the women who were supposed to be on duty. The maid went into the duty room in the gatehouse, but not a

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soul was anywhere to be seen. She came back and told You-shi. Very well, said You-shi, then she should go and fetch one of the stewardesses from the mansion. The maid went back into the mansion to the corner-house inside the inner gate which was used by the stewardesses as a meeting-place, but its only occupants on this occasion were two women busily engaged in sharing out some left-overs for their supper.

'Where are the stewardesses, then?' the girl asked them. 'My mistress from the Ning-guo is waiting for someone to give an order to.'

The women continued with their sharing-out. They felt little inclined to put themselves out for a visitor from the other mansion.

'The stewardesses have all gone home,' said one of them. 'In that case you'd better go and get one from her lodgings,' said the maid.

'Our job is to look after the rooms here, not to run errands,' said the woman. 'If you want someone fetched, you'd better go and find someone whose job it is to fetch them.'

'But this is rank mutiny!' said the maid. 'Not your job to run errands? You might fool a newcomer with such talk, but you don't fool me! If I'd asked you to go to one of the stewardesses with a private message or tell her to come and collect a tip, you'd be trotting off like a little puppy-dog to its master. There'd be no talk *then* about it not being your job to do errands. I'd like to hear you give Mrs Lian such an answe!'

Partly because they had had a drop to drink and partly because what the girl said was uncomfortably close to the truth, the women's resentment quickly flared into anger.

'Impertinent little baggage! We know very well what our job is; we don't need you to tell us. And before you start criticizing us, you might take a look at your own parents. The way they suck up to the stewards and stewardesses at *your* place is downright disgusting. You keep to your mansion and we'll keep to ours. Go and make trouble for your own people if you have a mind to, but keep away from us!'

The maid had become white-faced with anger.

'Good!' she said 'Very good!' and turning about, walked straight back into the Garden to report all this to her mistress.

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On entering the Garden some minutes previously, You-shi had come upon Aroma, Bao-qin and Xiang-yun laughing at a story that two nuns from the Convent of the Saviour King were telling them. When You-shi told them how hungry she was, they invited her to sit with them in the courtyard of **Green** Delights while Aroma went indoors to get her something to eat. Aroma found some rolls with meat and some with vegetable stuffing in them and put them in a food-box to carry out to her. She also brought out some tea for Bao-qin and Xiang-yun to sip while You-shi was eating the rolls. The nuns continued with their story. At that moment the maid arrived, still bursting with indignation, and proceeded to tell You-shi about her encounter and what the two women had said. You-shi was silent for some moments before she made any comment.

'What *extraordinary* behaviour!' she said finally.

One of the nuns gave the maidservant a prod.

'You are too quick-tempered, my child I You don't want to go repeating what those silly old women said to you. Your mistress is quite worn out from all her exertions during these past few days. What she needs is a little pick-me-up, something to cheer her up a bit. That's what we're trying to do, cheer her up. This is no time to come troubling her with that sort of talk!'

Aroma took the girl by the hand.

'Go off and calm down a bit, there's a good girl! *I'll* get someone to fetch one of the stewardesses.'

'It isn't necessary,' said You-shi. She addressed herself to the maid. 'Go and fetch those two women, and when you've done that, you can find out where Mrs Lian is and tell her I want to see her.'

'I'll go,' said Aroma.

'I'd rather you didn't,' said You-shi.

The two nuns rose to their feet with propitiatory smiles.

'Come, Mrs Zhen! You are such a kind, forgiving person as a rule. Surely you are not going to lose your temper on Her Old Ladyship's birthday? Whatever would people say?'

Bao-qin and Xiang-yun added their own smiling entreaties. 'All right,' said You-shi, 'I'll let them off- but only because it is Lady Jia's birthday.'

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Unfortunately Aroma had in the meantime already sent a junior maid outside the Garden to look for someone, and this girl was already pouring an account of what had happened into the receptive ear of Zhou Rui's wife, who, as it happened, was the first person she ran into.

Although Zhou Rui's wife was not actually a stewardess, she regarded herself as being of equal dignity with one on account of her special relationship with Lady Wang, who had brought her from the Wang household when she was married; moreover she was a somewhat insinuating woman, whose eagerness to please made her a popular servant with the younger mistresses. What the maid told her brought her flying over at once to **Green** Delights, brimming over with sympathy and concern.

'How shocking! Poor Mrs Zhen! No wonder she is so angry! I wish I had been there. I should have boxed their ears for them on the spot and settled accounts with them later!'

These worthy sentiments were uttered by her on the way. You-shi was pleased to see her when she arrived.

'Ah, my dear Zhou! Perhaps you will tell me whether or not I was right to feel concerned. When I came into the Garden just now, all the gates were wide open and candles were still burning in all the lanterns. Anyone would have been free to go in or come out as they pleased. I thought how awful it would be if anything were to happen, but when I gave orders for the duty-women to close the gates and put the lights out, not a single one was to be found.'

'Good gracious!' said Zhou Rui's wife. 'Mrs Lian gave special orders about this only a few days ago and *already* they're disobeying them! She'll have to flog a few of them when this is over; that's the only way to cure this sort of thing.'

You-shi then told her what the two women had said to her maid.

'Well, don't let it upset you, Mrs zhen,' said Zhou Rui's wife. 'Just wait until these celebrations are over: I'll have a word with the stewardesses and we'll take that precious pair and flog the daylights out of them. "You keep to your mansion and we'll keep to ours" indeed! They'll be singing a different tune from that by the time we've finished with them!'

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In the midst of this excitement someone arrived from Xifeng's, inviting You-shi to come back for some supper.

'I'm not hungry,' said You-shi. 'I've just been eating some rolls. Tell your mistress to have her supper without me.'

Zhou Rui's wife went round herself to Xi-feng's place shortly afterwards to repeat all this story to Xi-feng.

'All you need do is make a note of the women's names,' Xi-feng told her. 'When these celebrations are

over, you can have them tied up and sent over to Mrs Zhen to punish or pardon as she sees fit. It isn't a very serious matter.'

Now as it happened, Zhou Rui's wife was on very bad terms with these two women, and in her impatience to proceed against them, she put a somewhat loose construction on the warrant given her by Xi-feng, for she first of all sent a boy round to Lin Zhi-xiao's house to say that Lin Zhi-xiao's wife was wanted by You-shi immediately, and then sent some other servants to apprehend the two women, tie them up, and hand them over to the grooms to be shut up in the stables and kept under guard there until further notice.

Lin Zhi-xiao's wife, when she got the message, at once got into her carriage, wondering what on earth could be the matter, and hurried over to Xi-feng's place to inquire; but when, on reaching the inner gate, she sent someone inside to announce her, a maid came out and told her that Xi-feng had already gone to bed.

'It's Mrs Zhen that wants to see you,' said the girl. 'She's in the Garden now. You'd better look for her there.'

Lin Zhi-xiao's wife went into the Garden and hurried through it to Sweet-rice Village. You-shi was quite put out when the maids announced her arrival. She had her invited in immediately and smiled at her apologetically as she entered.

'I only asked for you because I wanted to give an order and nobody could be found. It wasn't anything serious. It certainly wasn't serious enough to call you out for specially. It is all over and done with now, in any case.'

Lin Zhi-xiao's wife smiled, a trifle grimly.

'But madam, Mrs Lian sent someone round to my place to say that you were asking for me.'

'If I was, it was under the impression that you were still

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here,' said You-shi. 'I suppose it must be Zhou's wife who told Mrs Lian about this. She need not have done so. It was really nothing of any consequence. Please go back home to bed.'

Li Wan was on the point of telling Lin Zhi-xiao's wife what the trouble was, but You-shi would not let her. Since evidently neither lady was going to tell her, Lin Zhi-xiao's wife took her leave. Just as she was coming out of the Garden gate, she ran into Aunt Zhao.

'Good gracious me! Still on your feet at this hour, Mrs Lin?' said Aunt Zhao. 'I'd have thought you'd be at home and tucked up in bed by now!'

'I *was* at home,' said Lin Zhi-xiao's wife, and proceeded to tell Aunt Zhao why she had been called out (for she had privately found out the reason for the summons before going into the Garden).

'Well, fancy calling you out for a piddling little thing like that!' said Aunt Zhao indignantly. 'She should either have ignored it altogether, if she was feeling generous, or if she was in an unforgiving mood, had the women given a few whacks and that would have been the end of the matter. There was no need to drag you out specially. I won't ask you in for a cup of tea now, you'll probably be wanting to get back to bed.'

Lin Zhi-xiao's wife continued on her way to the side gate where her carriage was waiting. The young daughters of the two imprisoned women were lying in wait for her there and, when they saw her coming, tearfully entreated her to intercede for their mothers. Iiin Zhi-xiao's wife merely laughed at them.

'Silly children! Those mothers of yours ought not to drink so much or be so free with their tongues - that's the cause of all this trouble. I don't know what makes them do it. It's Mrs Lian who had them tied up and I'm in trouble myself now, so I don't know what *I* can do to help them.'

The two daughters, being only little girls and of very limited understanding, continued to blubber and entreat and clung so obstinately to Lin Zhi-xiao's wife that she was unable to get into her carriage. She rounded on one of the two girls exasperatedly.

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'Stupid creature!' she said. 'What do you want to come hanging around *me* for when you could find help elsewhere? Wasn't your elder sister married to Mrs Fei's boy recently? Mrs Fei came here with Lady Xing when she was married. If you were to tell your sister about this and get her to have a word with Mrs Fei and Mrs Fei spoke about it to Lady Xing, that would be the end of the matter.'

Glad to be reminded, the girl went scampering off immediately; but the other girl continued to entreat. Lin Zhixiao's wife shoved her off impatiently.

'You really are a stupid child! Didn't I just say that if she has a word with her sister that will be the end of the matter? That means they'll both be let off. You surely d9n't think they'd let her mother off and give yours a beating?'

She got into her carriage then and drove back home.

The first little girl went and told her sister, as Lin Zhi-xiao's wife had told her to, and the sister at once repeated the story to her mother-in-law, Goody Fei. This Goody Fei was a notorious trouble-maker, whose first reaction to the story was a stream of invective, fully audible to the occupants of all the neighbouring courtyards, after which she went to solicit help from Lady Xing.

'It's my boy's mother-in-law, my lady: she only had a few words with a maid of Mrs Zhen's, but that Zhou woman told such a pack of lies about her to Mrs Lian that she had my boy's mother-in-law and the

woman that was with her tied up and shut in the stables and in a few days' time she's going to have them both beaten. Do, please, my lady, put in a good word with Mrs Lian and ask her to let them off.'

Ever since the Faithful fiasco Grandmother Jia's attitude towards Lady Xing seemed to have hardened, whilst Xi-feng's stature seemed to have grown at her mother-in-law's expense. The jealousy and resentment that Lady Xing felt as a consequence of this had recently been exacerbated by an imagined slight: the passing over of Ying-chun when the Dowager Princess of Nan-an asked to see the Jia girls and Tan-chun was the only one of the three to be called. Mischief-makers were not wanting to play upon her resentment, in this case representing Xi-feng's action as a deliberate attack on her authority.

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Her hatred of Xi-feng had now reached a degree of intensity that went beyond all reason.

Early next morning she went to pay her respects to Grandmother Jia. This was the junior clansmen's day. When Lady Xing got there, the junior clansmen had already arrived and the players were waiting to begin. Grandmother Jia always enjoyed meeting young people, and so today she was appearing in person to receive their congratulations, dressed in her ordinary clothes, since this was a family party and the guests were all her juniors. She was reclining in the middle of the rear part of the hall on a large wooden couch furnished with a back-rest and bolsters and a footstool in front of it in case she should wish to sit upright. Around her couch were ranged a number of identical stools on which Bao-chai, Bao-qin, Dai-Yu, Xiang-yun, Ying-chun, Tan-chun and Xi-chun were sitting. Of the twenty or so girls of their generation whose mothers had brought them there on this occasion two, Jia Bin's sister Xi-luan and Jia Qiong's sister Si-jie, had, on account of their good looks, well-spokenness and charming manners, found particular favour with Grandmother Jia and been invited to sit on stools with the other seven. Bao-yu sat up on the couch with his grandmother and massaged her legs for her. Aunt Xue had been given the place of honour in the ordering of the feast and the two lines of tables which rayed out on either side were occupied by the other ladies according to their husbands' seniority in the clan. The men sat on the verandah at either side of the hall, also in order of seniority.

Presently the birthday ceremony began. The female members of the clan were the first to make their kotows. The males would have come next, but Grandmother Jia lay back on the couch and sent someone outside to excuse them. Then Lai Da arrived with the male domestics. They knelt down, row upon row of them, from the ornamental gate all the way up to the steps at the foot of the hall, to make their kotows. After them it was the turn of the married women, and after them of the maids. Something like the time it would take to eat two or three meals must have elapsed before all the kotowing was over. Next a number of bird-cages were set down in the middle of the courtyard and the birds released from them. Then Jia She

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and the other seniors supervised the burning of paper offerings to Heaven-and-Earth and Old Longevity. Only then did the drinking and the play-acting begin.

Grandmother Jia remained until the players' mid-day interval before retiring to rest in her own room. She insisted that those of them who had escorted her there should go back and enjoy themselves, and asked Xi-feng to arrange for Xi-luan and Si-jie to stay on for a couple of nights after the party.

Xi-feng went off to speak to the girls' mothers. Both had received favours from her in the past and were only too happy to comply with anything she asked them, and the girls themselves were of course delighted at the prospect of playing in the Garden all day and not having to go home for the night.

Lady Xing bided her time until the evening; then, just as everyone was getting ready to go, she went up to Xi-feng in front of all the others and made her a request.

'I understand that you became angry with two old women last night and sent Zhou Rui's wife to have them tied up. I don't know what crime they had committed and it isn't of course my business to interfere, but it does seem to me that Lady Jia's birthday is an occasion when we should all be doing our utmost to help those less fortunate than ourselves -giving money and free rice to the old and needy and that sort of thing - hardly a time for maltreating aged domestics. Could you not see your way to releasing them, for Lady Jia's sake, if not for mine?'

Having said that, she got into her carriage and drove away. The humiliation of being addressed like this in front of so many people filled Xi-feng with anger and confusion. Her face turned a dusky **red** colour and for some moments she was so taken aback that she was unable to speak; then, turning to Lai Da's wife, she said, with a forced laugh:

'But this is ridiculous I Last night I heard that some of our people had been rude to Mrs Zhen, and as I was afraid that she might be feeling vexed about it, I naturally had them tied up so that they could be placed at her disposal. It wasn't *me* they had offended. I wonder what tale-bearing busybody is responsible for carrying this story next door?'

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'What exactly happened last night?' asked Lady Wang.

Xi-feng explained.

‘I didn’t even know about this myself,’ said You-shi, laughing. ‘Really, Feng, I think you *were* a trifle officious.’

‘I was concerned about you,’ said Xi-feng. ‘*You* had been insulted. It was a natural courtesy to place them at your disposal. Suppose I was at your place and some of your people insulted me? Wouldn’t you send them over to me for me to deal with? I thought that was a general principle which all of us observed, even if the servant in question was a highly valued one. Some meddlesome person has blown this incident up out of all proportion for the sake of stirring things up next door. I shouldn’t have thought myself that it was worth mentioning even.’

‘Your mother-in-law was quite right,’ said Lady Wang. ‘Cousin Zhen’s wife is one of us. There was no need for such empty courtesies in her case. Grandmother’s birthday is much more important. The women ought’ to be released.’

Xi-feng’s humiliation was now complete. A feeling of such wretchedness came over her that she could no longer hold back the tears of anger that had been collecting in her eyes. Not wishing them to be seen, she rushed back to her own apartment to weep alone.

She had hardly got back, though, when Grandmother Jia sent Amber round to summon her. Amber noticed with surprise that she had been crying.

‘Hullo, what’s all this about? She’s waiting to ask you about something.’

Xi-feng wiped away her tears, washed and dried her face, and put on a fresh lot of make-up before accompanying Amber back to Grandmother Jia’s apartment.

‘How many of the people who sent presents gave me screens ?’ the old lady asked Xi-feng when she arrived.

‘Sixteen,’ said Xi-feng. ‘There were twelve big screens and four little kang screens. The biggest screen was from the Zhens of Nanking: a twelve panel folding screen with a scene in silk tapestry on **crimson** satin from *A Heap of Honours* on one side and Symbols of Longevity in powder-gold on the

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other. There’s also quite a good enamelled screen from Admiral Wu’s lady.’

‘Yes, well don’t do anything with those two, then,’ said Grandmother Jia. ‘Just put them by somewhere where they will be safe. I want to give them to someone as a present.’

Faithful went over to Xi-feng and peered into her face.

‘What are you staring at her like that for?’ said Grandmother Jia. ‘Haven’t you seen her before?’

‘I was wondering why her eyes are so swollen,’ said Faithful.

‘Come over here,’ Grandmother Jia commanded, and scrutinized Xi-feng herself.

‘It’s because my eyes were itching and I’ve been rubbing them,’ said Xi-feng.

‘Are you sure someone hasn’t been upsetting you?’ said Faithful, laughing.

‘Who would dare?’ said Xi-feng. ‘And even if they had, I wouldn’t dare to cry on Her Old Ladyship’s birthday.’

‘I should think not indeed,’ said Grandmother Jia. ‘I’m just going to have dinner now. You can stay with me and watch me eat it, and then you and Zhen’s wife can share what’s left over. The two of you can help these sisters here to pick up Buddha beans.’ She indicated the pair of nuns whose presence Xi-feng had been vaguely aware of on entering. ‘It will add some years to your life. I let Bao-yu and the girls do it the other day. Now you two must have a go as well, so that no one can accuse me of favouritism.’

While she was speaking, the table had been laid and a meatless meal served for the two nuns. Then, when they had eaten, a meal with meat in it was served for Grandmother Jia. When she in turn had finished, the remains of her meal were carried into the outer room for Xi-feng and You-shi to eat. They had already started when Grandmother Jia had Xi-luan and Si-jie sent for to join them. After they had finished and washed their hands, some incense was lit and a pint of beans brought in, over which the two nuns chanted some prayers. The two young women, each armed with a pair of chopsticks, then had to pick the beans up one by one and drop them into a basket, to be boiled next day and given away to passers-by in the street.

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While they were thus engaged, Grandmother Jia reclined on her couch and listened to edifying stories told her by the two nuns.

Faithful had heard from Amber about Xi-feng’s crying and had been over to Xi-feng’s apartment herself to find out the reason for it from Patience. Late that evening, when everyone else had left, she spoke about it to Grandmother Jia.

‘Mrs Lian is still crying. It’s because she was shamed in front of everyone by Lady Xing.’

‘Oh?’ said Grandmother Jia. ‘Why was that?’

Faithful told her.

‘I think Feng acted quite correctly,’ said Grandmother Jia. ‘Surely we’re not going to allow our slaves to insult everyone with impunity just because it’s my birthday? I expect this was Lady Xing’s way of getting her own back for some grudge or other that she hadn’t had the courage to tackle her about at the time. It’s hard to see what other motive she could have had for humiliating her in public.’

Just at that moment Bao-qin came in and the subject had to be dropped. Bao-qin's presence reminded Grandmother Jia of her two young visitors. She called one of her women to her and gave her a message about them which she was to convey to the principal womenservants in the Garden.

'Tell them they must treat them just as they do our own young ladies. Anyone I hear of behaving disrespectfully to either of them will be punished mercilessly.'

'Better let *me* go,' said Faithful, before the woman had had time to get away. 'They'll never listen to her.'

She went off at once into the Garden. Her first call was at Sweet-rice Village; but neither Li Wan nor You-shi was there. The maids there told her that they were in Tan-chun's apartment with the others, so she retraced her footsteps and called in at Autumn Studio. She found Li Wan and You-shi in the Paulownia Room engaged in a conversation, punctuated by frequent bursts of laughter, with the rest of the Garden's little society. They welcomed Faithful with smiles and urged her to be seated.

'What are *you* doing here at this late hour?, they asked her.

'I suppose I'm allowed to walk in the Garden if I want to,'

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said Faithful, and passed on Grandmother Jia's message about Xi-luan and Si-jie.

Li Wan rose respectfully to receive it and at once sent someone to transmit it to the heads of all the apartments and instruct them to pass it on to their subordinates.

'Lady Jia has wonderful foresight,' You-shi commented drily. 'We energetic younger ones may tie up a dozen servants, but we are still not so effective as her.'

'I don't know,' said Li Wan. 'Cousin Feng may not quite come up to Lady Jia's standard, but she doesn't do too badly. Personally I find her foresight quite uncanny. Certainly *I* could never hope to match it.'

'You should have said *"poor* Cousin Feng",' said Faithful. 'She's in a bad way at the moment. During all the years she has been managing things she may not have put a foot wrong as far as Their Ladyships are concerned, but she has given a great deal of offence elsewhere. A daughter-in-law's life must be pretty impossible. If she is too meek and mild her in-laws will complain that she is stupid and the servants won't respect her, yet if she shows any initiative, there is always another set of problems rising up behind her back for every one that she deals with. In our household, where there are a certain number of mistresses who used once themselves to be maids, it's particularly difficult. Such people are so full of their own importance that they are always taking offence, and if they are the slightest bit crossed in anything they begin spreading stories about you or finding other ways of stirring up trouble. I haven't so far liked to say anything to Her Old Ladyship about this for fear of making her angry. If I ever do, people had better watch out, because then the sparks will begin to fly, I can tell you! Perhaps I shouldn't say this in front of you, Miss Tan, but you know how certain people are always carrying on about the way Her Old Ladyship makes a favourite of Bao-yu. Well now apparently that doesn't matter any more. That's just a "natural preference". Now it seems they're angry because Her Old Ladyship has been favouring you; Did you ever hear of anything so ridiculous?'

'There are a lot of very silly people about,' said Tan-chun. 'One really can't be bothered with what they say. I often think

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how nice it would be to live in a smaller household, even if it meant being poorer. Think how delightful it would be to have just oneself and one's parents and one or two brothers and sisters living together as one happy little family! People look at our great household and all its wealth and think how happy we must be; they don't realize that the vexations far outweigh the advantages.'

'You're much too thin-skinned, Tan,' said Bao-yu. 'I'm always telling you: you should pay no attention to what vulgar people say or do but concentrate on enjoying the luxuries and opportunities that wealth and position make available to us. Others who lack these things have some reason to complain. Why make yourself miserable when you have got them?'

'We can't all be as happy-go-lucky as you are,' said You-shi. 'All you think about is amusing yourself with the girls, eating when you are hungry and sleeping when you are tired. Each year to you is like the last. You haven't a thought in your head about the future.'

'It's the time I spend with the girls here that really matters,' said Bao-yu. 'If I die, I die. What do I care about the future?'

Li Wan and the others laughed.

'That's a silly way to talk. Even if *you* don't do anything with your life and spend all the rest of it in here, you surely don't think that the girls will be staying with you as well? They'll all be going off to get married.'

'I can understand why people say your growth has all gone into good looks,' said You-shi. 'You really *are* a silly fellow.'

'Man's life is uncertain,' said Bao-yu. 'Which of us knows when his time will come? Even if I die today or tomorrow or this year or next year, at least I shall have lived my life as I wanted to.'

The others would hardly let him finish what he was saying. 'Worse and worse! Best not encourage him. What he was saying just now was simpleton's talk, but this is raging lunacy!'

‘Don’t talk about dying, Cousin Bao,’ said little Xi-luan. ‘Lady Jia and Lady Wang are sure to feel lonely when all the girls have gone. I will come here and help you keep them company.’

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Li Wan and You-shi both laughed.

‘Now *you* are talking like a simpleton, young lady. Don’t you think *you* will be getting married then as well?’

Xi-luan was overcome with bashfulness and hung her head. The first watch was just sounding. They got up then and returned to their various apartments for the night.

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On her way back to Grandmother Jia’s, Faithful observed that one of the side gates of the Garden was shut but not yet barred. There was no one about. A faint light burned in the duty-room and a sliver of moon half-way up the sky shed a feeble radiance from above. As she had no companion to talk to, carried no lantern, and was walking softly, the women in the duty-room seemed not to have noticed her. She had for some time been wanting to empty her bladder, and this seemed as good an opportunity as any for doing so. She left the path and began looking for a place where the grass was not too high to squat down in.

She had found what looked like a good spot under a large osmanthus tree behind a Tai-hu rock and was just making her way round the side of the rock to reach it when a rustle of clothing caused her to jump almost out of her ‘skin. By straining her eyes she could make out two human shapes. They melted into the bushes at her arrival, but Faithful had very sharp eyes, and before they disappeared, the faint moonlight had enabled her to identify one of them by the **red** top, bouffant hair-style, and tall, somewhat heavy build, as Ying-chun’s head maid, Chess. She assumed that Chess and some other girl had been using the place as a convenience and had hidden themselves in the bushes when they saw her coming, intending to jump out at her presently and give her a scare.

‘Chess, come out of there!’ she called. ‘If you frighten me I shall scream, and then you will be taken for a thief. This is no time to be playing monkey-tricks, a big girl like you!’

These words were spoken in jest with no other motive than to prevent Chess jumping out and scaring her, but to Chess’s guilty conscience they seemed to imply that the secret she was hiding had been discovered. She was terrified that

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Faithful might cry out and others get to know about it as well, which would be even more frightful: and as Faithful had always been kind to her in the past, she resolved to throw herself on her mercy. Running out of the bushes, she knelt down and dung to her imploringly.

‘Faithful, I beg of you, for God’s sake don’t cry out!’

Not knowing what to make of this exaggerated reaction to her words, Faithful hastily pulled her to her feet.

‘Well, well, what’s all this about?’

Chess seemed unable to reply, but her body was trembling all over. Faithful was more mystified than ever. She looked again in the direction from which Chess had just come and saw a figure lurking there. It looked like a boy’s. She began to guess the reason for Chess’s terror. A sickening embarrassment made her own heart beat faster and she could feel her face burning to the very tips of her ears. She was afraid, too. After a brief silence in which she managed to recover some of her composure, she asked Chess, in a tremulous whisper, who ‘that other person’ was. Chess sank once more to her knees.

‘He’s my cousin, Faithful,’ she said faintly, ‘my father’s sister’s son.’

Faithful made a scornful sound, as if she did not believe her; but she was still too embarrassed to say anything.

‘There’s no need to hide,’ Chess called out softly to the boy. ‘My friend here had already seen you. Come out quickly and kotow.’

The boy darted out from the cover of the tree, threw himself on his knees in front of Faithful, and began knocking his head on the ground as if he were pounding garlic in a mortar. Faithful wanted to turn away, but Chess clung to her tearfully and beseechingly.

‘Our lives are in your hands, Faithful. Be merciful!’

‘Of course I shall; you don’t need to ask,’ said Faithful. ‘Tell him to go away. Whatever happens, I shan’t tell anyone. There’s no need for all this drama.’

Before she had finished speaking, a voice could be heard from the direction of the corner gate.

‘Miss Faithful’s already gone out. We can bar the gate now.’

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Chess was still clinging to her so hard that Faithful could not get away. She had to call out to the woman from where she stood.

'No, I'm still here. I've been doing something. Just a second: I'll be out directly.'

Chess, when she heard her say that, was obliged to let her go. The rest will be told in the following chapter.

CHAPTER 72

Wang Xi-feng refuses to see a doctor
And Brightie's wife seeks help with a betrothal

As Faithful went out of the corner gate, her cheeks were still burning and her heart was beating wildly. What an extraordinary encounter - and how unexpected! She began to consider what the consequences would be if she were to tell anyone. A crime involving both sexual delinquency *and* illicit entry could cost the offenders their lives - and other persons might well be implicated. She resolved to keep her discovery to herself. 'After all,' she reflected, 'it is really no business of mine.' And so, when she got back to Grandmother Jia's apartment, she gave only a routine account of her mission and went to bed without telling anyone about her experience.

But what of Chess? She and her father's sister's son - the boy whom Faithful had discovered with her in the Garden -had often played together as little children. In those days they were childhood sweethearts, innocently vowing, before they even knew the full meaning of the vow, that they would be husband and wife when they grew up or else would never marry. The years passed by and each grew up into a good-looking adolescent. Significant looks would pass between them when they saw each other during Chess's occasional visits home, and they knew, without needing to tell each other, that the childhood bond between them was as strong as ever. As they were both dreadfully afraid that their parents would oppose their meeting, they contrived - he working on his side and she on hers - to buy the support of the Garden women, so that gates might be left conveniently unbarred and notice obligingly be given when the coast was dear; and now, today, taking advantage of the confusion caused by the birthday celebrations, they had met for the first time inside

the Garden. They had not yet reached the point of physical union when Faithful surprised them, but they had exchanged vows and keepsakes and passionate endearments and were not far off it. Shortly after their discovery by Faithful, the boy managed to dodge away through the bushes and slip out of the corner gate unseen.

Chess did not sleep that night. She lay awake until dawn, bitterly regretting that she had ever agreed to the assignation. Meeting Faithful next day caused her to go hot and cold by turns, and all day long she felt as wretched and uncomfortable as if she were carrying a devil's child inside her. She had lost all her appetite for food and drink, and whether sitting or standing felt equally jumpy and ill at ease. This continued for two days. When two days had gone by and still nothing had happened, she began to feel a little easier.

But then one morning one of the old women from the Garden gate came round and whispered some news to her.

'Your cousin's run away. He hasn't been home now for three or four days. They're out everywhere looking for him.'

A wave of mingled alarm, anger and grief swept over her. 'Even if she'd told, he ought to have stayed,' she thought, 'and we could have died together. How *can* he love me, running away like that, without even waiting to find out?'

As a result of this latest shock she woke up next morning with a feeling of weakness inside her, and after trying unsuccessfully for a while to drag herself around, was forced to go back and lie down. This time she was ill in earnest.

When Faithful heard that one of the boys had unaccountably run away and that Chess was so ill that there was already talk of moving her out of the Garden, she was sure that in either case it was fear that she might betray them that had been the cause. So concerned did she feel about this that, on the pretext of paying a sick visit, she went to see Chess and reassure her. As soon as she could get the others out of the room, she swore a most solemn oath that she would never give her away.

'So just stop worrying and get better.' she told her. 'You are too young to throw your life away because of a thing like this.'

Chess clung to her hand and wept.

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‘Dear Faithful! We’ve known each other now since we were little girls. You have always been nice to me, and I have always respected you. If you really don’t tell anyone about this stupid mistake of mine, I promise to honour you as if you were my mother. From now on, each day I live will be a day I owe to you. If I get better, I shall set up a tablet with your name on it and kotow and burn incense to it every day and pray that you may have a long and happy life. But if I die, then I hope I may be reborn as a dog or an ass, if only I can have the chance to repay you.’
She went on to say much more in this vein, the tears all the while streaming down her cheeks, so that Faithful herself became affected and began to cry as well.
‘It’s your own imagination that is making you so ill,’ she said, shaking her head sadly. ‘Why should *I* want to go out of my way to destroy your reputation? To win someone’s approval? Surely you know me better than that? In any case, I am much too shy to talk about such things. Please stop worrying. From now on you must start getting better. And when you are better, try to live a little more sensibly in future. Don’t go getting yourself into scrapes like this again.’
Chess nodded her head vigorously upon the pillow. After speaking a few more words to comfort her, Faithful took her leave.
Faithful had noticed that Xi-feng had been somewhat off colour during these past few days. She happened to know that Jia Lian was out and thought she might as well drop in on Xi-feng on her way back and ask how she was. The servants on the inner gate stood up as she approached and remained standing until she disappeared into Xi-feng’s courtyard. As she entered the reception room, Patience was just emerging from inside. She smiled when she saw Faithful and hurried up to her.
‘She’s just eaten and now she’s having an afternoon nap,’ she said in a low voice. ‘Come into the other room and we’ll have a chat.’
At her insistence Faithful accompanied her into the room on the east side of the reception room and sat down with her. A junior maid poured them both some tea.

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‘Tell me, what’s been the matter with your mistress during these past few days?’ said Faithful. ‘She seems so lethargic.’
Patience sighed.
‘It’s not just these last few days,’ she said, having first looked round to make sure that no one else was within hearing. ‘It goes back a month at least. It’s just that all the work of the last few days and that upset with Lady Xing coming on top of it have made her worse. so that people are beginning to notice.
‘In that case why doesn’t she call a doctor?’
‘My dear Faithful,’ said Patience, ‘surely you know our Mrs Lian better than that? It’s not just calling a doctor or taking medicine that she objects to. Sometimes, because I can’t bear to see her looking so ill, I’ll ask her, quite casually, “How do you feel today?”; but even that will be enough to make her angry. She says there’s nothing wrong with her and that I’m trying to make her ill by talking about it. In spite of feeling so poorly, she still insists on keeping up with everything that goes on in the household. It worries me. How can she ever get better if she herself won’t face up to the fact that she is ill?’
‘She really *ought* to call a doctor,’ said Faithful. ‘Surely it would be a relief just to know what she is suffering from?’
Patience sighed.
‘Whatever it is, if you ask me, it’s something pretty serious.
‘Oh?’ said Faithful. ‘What kind of trouble is it then?’
Patience leaned forwards and spoke very softly into her ear.
‘During this past month, ever since she had her last period’ it’s been drip-drip, drip-drip all the time. Surely that’s serious, isn’t it?’
‘Aiyo!’ said Faithful. ‘It sounds as if the blood-gate has burst.’
Patience gave a little laugh.
‘Oh Faithful, you are a baby! What a thing to say! Poor Mrs Lian!’
Faithful coloured, and she laughed as well, a trifle sheepishly.
‘Well *I* don’t know what it means myself. It’s just that I

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heard them saying it about my elder sister. You’ve probably forgotten: she died of something rather like this. I was too young at the time to know what was the matter with her, but I remember hearing my mother talking about it to my sister’s mother-in4aw and one of them saying “The blood-gate’s burst” and wondering at the time what it could mean. Later on, when I heard more about her illness, I thought I understood, but I don’t suppose I did really.’
While they were talking, a little maid came in with a message.
‘Old Mrs Zhu has been again. We told her the mistress had just laid down for her afternoon nap so she went

off to Lady Wang's room.'
Patience nodded.
'Which Mrs Zhu is that?' said Faithful.
'She's an official marriage-broker working for one of the yamens,' said Patience. 'She's come on behalf of Sir Sun Somebody-or-other who wants one of our young Jia ladies for his son. Old nuisance I She's been around here every day during the past few days, flashing her card at everyone.'
At that moment another little maid came hurrying into the room.
'Mr Lian's back!'
Patience hurried out to meet him as he stepped into the reception room outside. He began walking into the side room, since it was the room that Patience had just come out of, but halted on the threshold when he caught sight of Faithful sitting inside on the kang.
'Ah, my dear Faithful!' he said, smiling broadly. 'What favourable wind has blown you to our humble abode?'
Faithful smiled back at him. She made no effort to get up. 'I came here to pay my respects to you and Mrs Lian, but one of you was out and the other one was having a nap.'
'You're so busy all the year round waiting on Her Old Ladyship,' said Jia Lian, still smiling, 'it's we who should come to see you, not the other way round.' He paused. 'As a matter of fact it's rather a stroke of luck that you *have* come here today. I was on my way to see you just now. The only reason I dropped in here was because this gown I am wearing

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is too hot and I wanted to change into something cooler before going on to see you. But God is good to me, it seems: your being here means that I am saved the trouble of going out again.'
He sat himself down in a chair.
'What was it you wanted to see me about?' said Faithful.
Jia Lian gave a preliminary laugh.
'Something I've forgotten about that *you* may perhaps remember. On Her Old Ladyship's birthday last year some travelling monk made her a present of a Buddha's hand modelled in coloured wax. She was so taken with it that she immediately had it put on display somewhere where she could admire it. When I was going through the inventory of her ornaments the other day in preparation for these birthday celebrations, I found an entry for the thing but couldn't discover where it had got to; and as I wasn't able to tick it off on the inventory, the steward of the ornaments room has been on to me a couple of times since then asking me to find out where it is. Do *you* know? Has Her Old Ladyship still got the thing on display somewhere in her own apartment, or has she handed it over to someone else?'
'After she'd had it on display for a couple of days, she grew tired of it and gave it to Mrs Lian,' said Faithful.
'I don't know why you should be asking *me* about it! I can even remember the day, and the person I sent round with it. It was Old Wang's wife. You should ask Mrs Lian or Patience about it. They will tell you.'
Patience, who had just been seeing to some clothes, came hurrying in again.
'Certainly she gave it to us. It's upstairs here in the loft. Mrs Lian long ago sent someone to tell the steward that *we'd* got it. I suppose he was too lazy to make a note of it at the time. It's too bad that he should be making a fuss about it now.'
'If she gave it to your mistress,' said Jia Lian, 'how is it that I don't know anything about it? I think you must have been hiding it from me.'
'The mistress *did* tell you about it,' said Patience. 'You wanted to give it to someone as a present, but the mistress wouldn't let you. She had a terrible job persuading you to let

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her keep it. Fancy your forgetting - and then having the nerve to accuse us of hiding it from you! If we were going to start hiding things from you, we could do a bit better than that! We have been given things ten times more valuable, but invariably you have been told.'
Jia Lian looked down smilingly and reflected, then clapped his hands suddenly as he remembered.
'Why yes, of course. How stupid of me! I'm forgetting everything these days; no wonder people get so cross with me. I'm not the man I was!'
'It's hardly surprising,' said Faithful. 'You have so much to do and so many people to deal with. By the time you've had a couple of drinks, you can't be expected to remember very much!'
She got up to go. Jia Lian too rose to his feet.
'Do stay a little longer. I want to ask you a favour.'
He turned rather crossly to one of the junior maids.
'Can't we have some better tea than this? Get some clean cover-cups and use some of that tea we were given yesterday.'
He turned back to Faithful.
'During these past few days, because of Her Old Ladyship's birthday celebrations, we've got through the last few thousand taels we had. Our house-rents and land-rents aren't due in until the ninth month. Until then we

have nothing. Yet soon we shall be having to buy presents for the Princess of Nan-an's birthday, and there are the presents we shall have to send to Her Grace on the Double Ninth and various weddings and funerals to provide for. We need at least two or three thousand taels to pay for these things. It would be difficult to borrow that much outside at present; and as they say self-help is the best help, I am turning to you to ask if you would be prepared, for all our sakes, to commit a very tiny little crime. Could you possibly look out a few gold and silver things that Her Old Ladyship would not be likely to miss and smuggle a boxful of them out to me enough for me to raise about a thousand taels on - just to tide us over the next week or two? As soon as our money comes in I shall redeem them and give them back to you. I promise you shan't get into any trouble.'

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Faithful smiled.
'Nobody can say you aren't ingenious. Whatever will you think of next?'
'Look, I'm not just saying this to flatter you,' said Jia Lian, 'but though I know plenty of other people who have a thousand taels' worth of stuff in their keeping, they none of them have your courage or intelligence. If I made a proposal like this to one of *them,* I'd frighten the wits out of them. That's why I turn to you. Better one stroke of the big bell than a thousand tinkles on the little cymbal!'
At that moment one of the junior maids from Grandmother Jia's apartment came in. She seemed somewhat Out of breath.
'Her Old Ladyship wants you. I've been ages looking for you. I never thought you would be here.'
Faithful hurried out after her. Jia Lian went inside to see Xi-feng.
Xi-feng had, as a matter of fact, been awake for some time. She had heard Jia Lian make his request but, not liking to intervene, had remained lying where she was. She knew that Faithful had left.
'Well?' she asked as Jia Lian entered. 'Is it settled?'
'Not quite,' said Jia Lian, smiling. 'As good as. I think if *you* were to go over and have a word with her, it would tip the balance.'
'It's nothing to do with me, what you get up to,' said Xi-feng. 'Suppose she does agree. Once you've got your hands on the money, you'll like as not forget all your fine promises and just hang on to her stuff. And what can she do then? Nothing. Then suppose Grandmother finds out? Her confidence in me, that it has taken me all these years to build up, will be completely shattered.'
'Come on, be an angel!' Jia Lian pleaded. 'I promise you won't regret it.'
'Why, what will you give me?' said Xi-feng.
'Just say,' said Jia Lian. 'Anything you like.'
'I know what to ask him for,' said Patience, who had been near at hand listening. 'You know you said earlier there was something you were planning to do that you would need one or two hundred taels for: ask him to let you have two hundred

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taels of the money he raises on pawn. That ought to suit both of you.'
'Thank you for reminding me,' said Xi-feng. 'Yes, I will.'
'You are a terrible woman!' said Jia Lian. 'Never mind things to pawn, if you had a mind to, you could probably let me have four or five thousand taels *cash.* All I'm asking you to do is say a few words for me - and even for that you want to charge I No wonder you and I -'
Xi-feng leaped to her feet angrily, breaking in before he could finish.
'Well, what of it? The "four or five thousand taels" is my own money, isn't it? I haven't cheated you Jias out of it. Just about everyone in this establishment nowadays seem to spend their time discussing my shortcomings. It only needed you. Well, they say that when a house is haunted it's one's own ghost that invites the others in. Why do you always assume that any money I have must be Jia money? I haven't noticed that your family is so staggeringly rich. You're not exactly millionaires, are you? We Wangs could probably keep you going for the rest of your lives just with the sweepings from our floor! I don't want to boast, but just take a look at the dowries that Aunt Wang and I brought with us when we came here and try matching them, item for item, with things of your own.'
Jia Lian laughed.
'How you do fly off the handle! I was only joking. You can have a hundred or two hundred taels *now* if you need them. I couldn't give you much more than that, but that much at least I can manage. Take it now and speak to her when you've spent it. How's that for an offer?'
'I'm not in *that* much of a hurry,' said Xi-feng. 'It isn't pennies for a laying-out I'm after.'
'Bless my soul, what a passion you're in!' said Jia Lian.
Xi-feng laughed.
'No, I'm not really. But I found what you said just now very wounding. The day after tomorrow is the anniversary of Er-jie's death. Since we were sisters for a little while, I thought the least I could do was visit her grave and make her a few offerings. She didn't give us a son, it's true, but we

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mustn't "let the dust of those who have gone before get into the eyes of those who follow". That's what I wanted the money for.'

Jia Lian said nothing for some moments. Xi-feng had effectively shut him up.

'You are very thoughtful,' he said eventually. Then, after another pause, 'Since you won't need the money till the day after tomorrow, we may as well wait and see whether or not Faithful will let us have the things. If she does, you will be able to take what you want after I have pawned them.'

At that moment Brightie's wife came hurrying in.

'Well?' Xi-feng asked her. 'Is it settled?'

'No,' said Brightie's wife. 'Nothing doing. It's as I said: unless we have your backing for it, we shan't get anywhere.'

'What's this?' said Jia Lian.

'Oh, nothing serious,' said Xi-feng. 'Brightie and his wife have a son who is seventeen this year and not yet married and they wanted to get Lady Wang's Sunset for him. They haven't done anything about it previously, because they didn't know what Lady Wang might have in mind for her. Now it seems that because Sunset has had so much illness during the past year, Lady Wang has sent her back to her parents and said they can choose a husband for her themselves. Brightie's wife asked me if I would speak to the parents on her behalf but I thought that as the families were so obviously suited, her parents couldn't possibly have any objection to the match and that Brightie and his wife would be able to arrange it themselves. But it seems that I was wrong.'

'It doesn't matter, does it?' said Jia Lian. 'Surely there are plenty of others as good as Sunset they could get for him, or even better?'

'That's as may be, sir,' said Brightie's wife with a somewhat artificial smile, 'but if people see that we are not even good enough for the likes of them, it doesn't do much for our prestige. I took a lot of trouble choosing that girl for him and I hoped that you and Mrs Lian would be so very kind as to settle the matter for us, for I know you could do so if you wished. But Mrs Lian she said no, there was no need, they'd be sure to agree. Well, I got a woman to speak to the parents

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for me, and now she's just come back from them with a flea in her ear. I don't think there's any objection as far as the girl is concerned. I've sounded her out once or twice in the past and as far as I could make out she would be quite willing. It's that stupid old couple with their high and mighty ideas that are the stumbling-block.'

These words were intended to put Jia Lian and Xi-feng on their mettle; but Xi-feng could hardly take the initiative in her husband's presence and watched Jia Lian in silence to see what he would do, whilst Jia Lian for his part had too much on his mind to be bothered with anything so trifling. He would probably have ignored it altogether were it not for the fact that Brightie and his wife were rather special servants. Xi-feng had brought them from her father's house when she was married and they had served her devotedly ever since. Jia Lian realized that to be refused help now that they had openly requested it would be regarded by them as a very great loss of face.

'Well, it's hardly a matter calling for so much palaver,' he said impatiently. 'Be on your way now and stop worrying about it! I'll send a couple of senior people tomorrow with the betrothal presents to have a talk with her father and tell him that I am sponsoring the match. If he *still* holds out against it, I'll have him over and talk to him myself.'

Brightie's wife looked questioningly at Xi-feng. In answer to her look Xi-feng made a barely perceptible movement with her lips, whereupon Brightie's wife got down on her knees and made Jia Lian a kotow.

'It's your mistress you should be kotowing to,' said Jia Lian hurriedly. 'Although I shall be talking to her father, you'll still have to persuade your mistress to send' for the mother and have a word with *her*, otherwise it will seem too much like coercion. After all, you'll want to be on speaking terms with your son's in4aws after the boy is married.'

'If *you* are prepared to take so much trouble on their behalf, you surely don't think that *I* am going to stand idly by?' said Xi-feng. 'All right, Brightie's wife, you've heard what we are going to do for you: now I want you to do something for me. I want you to ask your husband to chase after all the people

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I have lent money to and see to it that all the loan accounts are cleared by the end of this year. Tell him I must have every penny back, or he'll be in trouble! My reputation is quite bad enough already. If I go on lending money at interest for another year, people will be wanting to eat me up alive.'

'It isn't like you to be so timid, Mrs Lian,' said Brightie's wife, smiling. 'Who would dare to criticize you? It

seems such a shame, after the work we've put into this, to call all the money in again.'
'I don't want it for myself in any case,' said Xi-feng; 'it was a means of supplementing the housekeeping, because without it our expenditure was so much greater than our income. Mr Lian's and my allowance for the month, including the allowances for four maids, is less than twenty taels: barely enough to keep us going for four or five days. If I hadn't scraped together a bit of extra on the side, I don't know what sort of hovel we should have been living in by now. And so now I've got myself a bad name. I'm a usurer. Very well, I'll call it all in again and stop lending money altogether. *I* can spend money as fast as anyone else - though how we are supposed to manage if we just all sit back and spend without a thought in our heads for the future I fail to understand. Lady Wang spent two months worrying about how she was going to manage for Her Old Ladyship's birthday. In the end I reminded her about four or five boxes of big, useless bronze things in the rear upstairs store-room and suggested that we should try pawning them. We did, and raised three hundred taels, which was barely enough to tide her over the celebrations. And you know of course about my chiming dock. I sold that for three hundred and sixty taels, but in less than half a month every penny of it had gone into paying bills. Now it seems the menfolk are running short and someone has had the bright idea of trying to get something Out of Her Old Ladyship. Another year like this and we shall be pawning our jewellery and our clothes!'
Brightie's wife laughed.
'Well, I dare say every one of you ladles has enough jewellery to keep you all for the rest of your lives, if she had a mind to pawn it.'

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'No doubt it's silly of me,' said Xi-feng, 'but personally I could never bring myself to live like that. - Oh, I must tell you,' she said' changing the subject, 'I had rather a funny dream last night. Someone - I didn't know who he was, though he looked familiar - came and told me that Her Grace had sent him to ask me for a hundred lengths of brocade. I said "Which Her Grace?". He told me a name, but it was the wrong one, so I refused. Then he came forward and tried to take the stuff from me by force. That was when I woke up.'
'That's because your obligations to Her Grace are so much on your mind during the daytime,' said Brightie's wife, laughing.
The words were barely out of her mouth when a messenger from the Palace was announced - a little eunuch sent by Xia Bing-zhong, the eunuch Master of the Bedchamber. Jia Lian frowned when he heard the announcement.
'I wonder what it is this time? You'd have thought he'd had enough out of us already this year.'
'Make yourself scarce and let *me* speak to him,' said Xi-feng. 'If it's only a little thing he wants, we needn't worry; but if it's something big he's after, I think I know how to handle this.'
Jia Lian slipped into one of the side rooms at the back, while Xi-feng gave orders for the little eunuch to be brought in. She made him sit down and accept a cup of tea before inquiring about the purpose of his visit.
'Daddy Xia saw a house today that he would very much like to buy, but he's two hundred taels short of the price they are asking. He sent me to ask you if you happen to have one or two hundred taels on you you could let him have just for the time being. He will pay you back in a day or two.
'Why talk of paying back?' said Xi-feng genially. 'We've got plenty of money, just help yourselves. Why don't we just say that if we are ever short of money, we'll come and borrow some from *you*.'
'Oh, Daddy Xia also told me to tell you that he still hasn't paid back the twelve hundred taels he owes you from the last two times, but he says he will definitely pay it all back to you by the New Year.'
Xi-feng laughed.

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'Your Daddy Xia is an old fuss-pot, tell him. He really shouldn't worry his head over such trifles. I hope he won't think I am complaining, but if everyone were as scrupulous as he is about paying back the money they owe us, we should be millionaires. About this money he wants now, though: I wonder if I *have* got that much ready cash to give him. He's certainly very welcome to it if I have.'
She called Brightie's wife to her.
'Pop out and see if you can get two hundred taels for me, will you? It doesn't matter where from.'
Brightie's wife at once caught on to the little game her mistress was playing.
'I've just been trying to get hold of some,' she said brightly. 'That's why I'm here. I couldn't get any outside, so I thought *you* might have some.'
'You people aren't very resourceful,' said Xi-feng crossly. 'Why is it that when you want money you *always* have to fall back on me?'
She called Patience in.
'Patience, get out my two gold necklaces and see if you can pawn them for four hundred taels.'
Patience left the room and came back presently with an embroidered box in which were two magnificent collars of jewellery, every bit as fine as any that could be found in the Palace, each carefully wrapped up in a piece of silk brocade. One of them was made of gold wire and pearls the size of lotus-seeds; the other was of kingfisher-feathers and gold, studded with precious stones. She went off with these and returned some time

later with the four hundred taels, half of which Xi-feng wrapped up for the little eunuch, while the other half she handed over to Brightie's wife to buy presents for the Mid-Autumn festival with.
The little eunuch now took his leave. Xi-feng sent someone to carry the money for him as far as the main gate.
'These people really are a pest!' said Jia Lian emerging from his hiding-place. 'There seems to be no end to their borrowing.'
'Just as I'd been telling you about my dream,' said Xi-feng. 'Talk of the devil!'
'Yesterday it was Chamberlain Zhou,' said Jia Lian. 'The

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first thing he said when he opened his mouth was could I lend him a thousand taels. Because I hesitated a bit before saying yes, he started looking huffy. I can see us making any number of enemies this way. What we need right now is a windfall of forty or fifty thousand taels!'

Patience came in to help Xi-feng wash and change preparatory to going over to wait on Grandmother Jia at dinner. Jia Lian went off to his outside study. He had barely got there when Lin Zhi-xiao came hurrying in, evidently bursting with some news. When Jia Lian asked him what it was, he said that Jia Yu-cun bad been demoted.
'I don't know what it was for,' he said. 'It may not be true, in any case.'
'Even if it's not,' said Jia Lian, 'he's sure to get thrown out of that job sooner or later. We'd be well advised to have as little to do with him as possible.'
'I'm sure you're right, sir,' said Lin Zhi-xiao. 'But that's easier said than done. Sir She is on very good terms with him, and Sir Zheng likes him. Everyone knows that he is a regular visitor here.'
'Well, I suppose as long as we don't get involved in any of his schemes it shouldn't matter,' said Jia Lian. 'You'd better go and make some more inquiries. Find out if he really has been demoted, and if so, what for.'
Lin Zhi-xiao said he would do so, but showed no inclination to leave. Instead he sat down in a chair and began talking to Jia Lian about this and that. Presently they got on to the subject of the household's financial difficulties. Lin Zhi-xiao took the opportunity of airing his own idea of a solution.
'We've got too big a staff,' he said. 'We ought to pick a day when there's no other business on hand and ask Her Old Ladyship and Sir Zheng if we can't give some of those older servants who are a bit past it now an honourable discharge. It would be a kindness to them, because they've all got little jobs of their own to fall back on, and it would mean a big saving for us in the amount we have to spend every year on wages and keep. And there's another thing: there are far too many maids. As the proverb says, "The times get worse but never better." It's no good trying to live in the style we used

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to keep up twenty or thirty years ago. If every apartment which in the past used to employ eight girls were now to employ six and those which used to employ four girls were to make do with two, the saving in wages and keep would be enormous. Most of those girls are in any case old enough now to be married. If we pair them off now with our boys, before we know where we are they will be breeding new servants for us.'

'I'm entirely in agreement with you,' said Jia Lian. 'The trouble is that as Sir Zheng has only just got back, he doesn't want to be bothered with anything yet. At the moment even quite important matters are having to be shelved. We'd never get him to discuss a small domestic matter like this. A couple of days ago an official marriage-broker came round here with all her credentials, wanting to arrange a match between her client's son and one of our young ladies, but Lady Wang said that Sir Zheng was so happy to be home again with his family all around him - she says he's hardly stopped talking about "family togetherness" since the day he got back - that she felt sure it would upset him to have to talk about the girls getting married and leaving home, and she forbade anyone to mention it to him.'
'Why, I'm sure that's as it should be,' said Lin Zhi-xiao. 'Her Ladyship is a very thoughtful lady.'
'Talking of marriage-brokers, that reminds me,' said Jia Lian. 'Our Brightie's boy wants to marry Sunset from Her Ladyship's room and Brightie's wife has been asking me if I would arrange it for them. It seems to me that it's hardly important enough for that. Could one of you go round and see the girl's father for me? You could tell him that it has my approval.'
Lin Zhi-xiao agreed to do so, but without much enthusiasm. After a longish pause he added,
'I think if I was you, sir, I wouldn't get myself involved. That boy of Brightie's is only a lad, but already he's drinking too much and gambling and getting up to all sorts of capers. I know they're only slaves, but marriage is for a lifetime, after all. I haven't seen Sunset myself for some years, but by all accounts she's grown up into a very presentable young woman. It would seem a pity to throw her away on the likes of him.'

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'Oh, so Brightie's boy has been misbehaving, has he?' said Jia Lian. 'It seems to me that it's not a wife he needs but a thundering good hiding. I think you'd better give him one to get on with and then lock him up

and ask his parents what they propose to do about him.'
Lin Zhi-xiao laughed.
'We don't have to do that *now*, surely? Next time he gives trouble, we'll let you know and you can deal with him then. It doesn't seem quite the time to tackle him about it now.'
Jia Lian made no reply and Lin Zhi-xiao shortly afterwards got up and left.
That evening Xi-feng summoned Sunset's mother to her in order to propose the marriage with Brightie's son. Sunset's mother had all along been opposed to it, but it was so flattering to have Xi-feng talking to her like this, woman to woman, that she found herself agreeing to everything in spite of herself. When, some time after she had left, Jia Lian returned, Xi-feng asked whether he had spoken yet to the father.
'No, I haven't,' said Jia Lian. 'I was going to talk to him about it, but then I heard that that boy of Brightie's is turning out a thoroughly bad lot, so I put it off. If what they told me about him is true, I think we ought to give him a good, sharp lesson or two before we set about getting a wife for him.'
'None of us Wangs seem to find much favour with you people nowadays,' said Xi-feng frostily. 'I suppose since *I* don't meet with your approval, it's hardly surprising that you should be dissatisfied with my servants. I've already spoken to her mother about it and she was overjoyed. What am I supposed to do now? Call her in again and tell her it's all off?'
'No, no,' said Jia Lian. 'If you've already arranged it with her mother, it will have to stand. But you'll have to have a word with Brightie tomorrow and tell him to do something about that boy.'
Our narrative moves at this point to the unfortunate object of these manoeuvrings.

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> When, some days previous to this, Lady Wang sent Sunset back home to her parents, it was on the express understanding
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> that they might choose for her whatever son-in-law they wished. Brightie's visits to her parents filled Sunset with foreboding. Her union with Jia Huan had not yet been approved, but she had long since given her heart to him and knew that she could never be happy with Brightie's son. When, shortly after that, she learned that Brightie's son was a drunkard and a gambler and hideously ugly into the bargain, she became even more alarmed. The fear that Brightie and his wife might use their influence with Xi-feng to force her parents to accept the match finally made her so frantic that, on the evening of the day on which these other events took place, she told her younger sister, Moonrise, to go in secret to Aunt Zhao and try to find out exactly what was happening.

Now Aunt Zhao had always got on well with Sunset and had been longing for the day when Sunset could become Jia Huan's concubine, thus providing her at the same time with an ally. It was an unexpected blow to her when Sunset was sent back home to her parents, and she was constantly urging Jia Huan to go and ask Lady Wang if he might have her for himself; but partly because Jia Huan was too bashful to open his mouth about it, and partly because he did not in any case care about her very much (after all, he thought, she was only a maid; there would be plenty even better than her in the future) he hung back, hoping that the matter would eventually be dropped. But Aunt Zhao did not give up so easily, and the night that Sunset sent her younger sister to see her she tried to enlist Jia Zheng's support. Jia Zheng was unenthusiastic.
'What's the hurry?' he said. 'Wait until the boys have spent another year or two at their studies, it will be soon enough then. I've already got my eye on a couple of girls, one for Bao-yu and one for Huan, but I think they are too young yet. I am afraid that if they had the girls now, it would get in the way of their studies. You can speak to me about this again in a year or two's time.'
Aunt Zhao would have gone on trying, but just at that moment there was a loud crash outside which made them both jump.
You will have to look at the next chapter, however, in order to find out what caused it.

CHAPTER 73

A half-witted servant-girl picks up a
highly embarrassing object
And an easy-going young mistress refuses
to inquire into a theft

As we were saying at the end of the last chapter, Aunt Zhao and Jia zileng were interrupted in the midst of their discussion by a sudden crash. The maids, when questioned, said that it had been caused by an outer casement of one of the windows falling. It could not have been properly fastened and must have slipped its

catch. After first roundly cursing them, Aunt Zhao went outside with them to supervise its replacement. When she came in again, she helped Jia Zheng to settle down for the night. And so we leave them.

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Meanwhile, over at **Green** Delights, Bao-yu had just gone to bed. The maids were themselves on the point of doing so when a sudden knocking was heard at the courtyard gate. The old woman who opened it recognized the caller as a maid of Aunt Zhao's called Magpie, and asked her what she wanted; but instead of answering, the girl pushed past her and rushed straight inside. She found Bao-yu already lying down, but engaged in bantering conversation with Skybright and a couple of other maids who were sitting on the edge of his bed.

'What's the matter?' they asked when they saw who their visitor was. 'What brings *you* out at this hour?'

'I've come to warn you,' said Magpie, addressing herself in an urgent whisper to Bao-yu. 'I heard my mistress just now jabbering to Sir Zheng about something, and though I couldn't make out what they were talking about, I heard him say "Bao-yu" a couple of times. I thought I'd better put you on your guard in case he asks to see you tomorrow about anything.'

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She turned and hurried out again as soon as she had finished speaking. Aroma told someone to run after her and ask her to stay for a cup of tea, but she was afraid of being shut inside the Garden when they closed the gate, and insisted on going back immediately.

Bao-yu knew that in Aunt Zhao's twisted imagination he was regarded as an enemy, and though he did not know what she had said, the mere fact that she had been talking about him was enough to make him feel uncomfortable all over, much as Monkey did when he heard Tripitaka reciting the spell for tightening the iron band round his head. After giving the matter some thought, he concluded that the only practical way in which he could prepare himself for the morrow would be by revising his texts. Should his father take it into his head to test him, he reasoned, then if only he could be word-perfect in his texts, it would not be so difficult to bluff his way through whatever else he might ask him. Having made the decision, he hurriedly threw a gown over his shoulders and prepared to begin some revision, bitterly regretting that Jia Zheng's silence on the subject of lessons since his last return from duty had lulled him into a false sense of security.

'I ought to have had more sense,' he told himself. 'One really ought to do a little bit every day, to keep in practice.'

He began to reckon up how much he could still recite from memory. He found that there was little more than *The Great Learning*, *The Doctrine of the Mean* and the two halves of the *Analects* that he could be absolutely sure of. The first half of *Mencius* he knew reasonably well, but certainly not well enough to be able to carry on from any sentence given him at random. The second half was virtually *terra incognita*. Of the *Five Classics* he was fairly familiar with the *Poetry Classic* because he was frequently having to read bits of it in connection with his own versifying. Though far from word-perfect, he probably knew it well enough to scrape through a test. He could not remember any of the other classics at all; but fortunately his father had so far never asked him to study them, so probably it would not matter. When it came to Old Style Prose, the case was rather different. Over the past few years he had read extracts from the Zuo, Gong-yang and Gu-liang

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commentaries on the *Spring and Autumn Annals* and various Han and Tang pieces, but he had only dipped into them as the fancy took him; he had not done any serious work on them. There was certainly no question of his being able to remember them. There was even less likelihood of his being able to pass muster on the Examination Essay. He had always detested this style of writing in any case. The Sage himself didn't write that way, he argued, so how could one hope to expound the inner meaning of his teachings through such a medium? It was no more than a device used by vulgar fortune-seekers for starting themselves off on the golden road to success. Before he left, Jia Zheng had selected a hundred of these essays for him to read; but Bao-yu had only glanced at them occasionally, reading a paragraph here and a paragraph there as some particularly felicitous expression or the extravagance, humour or melancholy of the writer happened to catch his attention. He had never settled down to the serious analytical examination of even a single essay.

He began to revise; but the trouble was that whatever he revised now, he was sure to be asked about something else next day, and the whole night would not be long enough to revise everything. It soon became apparent that all he was succeeding in doing was getting himself into an even worse state of nerves than he had been in to begin with and, while studying to no purpose himself, preventing a whole roomful of girls from sleeping as well.

Aroma and the other senior maids could at least occupy themselves by trimming his lamp, pouring him cups of tea and so forth; but the younger ones could neither go to bed nor find any employment to keep themselves awake, and sat about the place, drooping and nodding in various attitudes of fatigue. Skybright became indignant.

‘Lazy little wretches! You sleep all day as it is. Just for once in your lives you are asked to stay up late, and look at you! If you don’t liven yourselves up a bit, I shall come and stick pins in you all!’

As she said this, there was a loud bang from the outer room. It turned out to have been caused by a little maid who had dozed off while sitting on the kang and in doing so had

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bumped her head against the partition. Waking with a start just as Skybright was uttering this threat, she assumed that the bump on the head she had just received must have been dealt her by Skybright. To the great amusement of the other girls she began tearfully begging her for mercy.

‘Oh no I Please, Skybright! I promise I won’t do it again!’

‘Don’t punish her,’ Bao-yu called out. ‘You ought to allow those younger ones to go to bed. And you older ones too -you don’t *all* need to stay up. You should be taking it in tarns to get some sleep.’

‘Little ancestor!’ said Aroma exasperatedly. ‘You get on with your work! Just for this one night try to concentrate all your energies on studying. Once you’ve got over this hurdle; you can make what other arrangements you like!’

She sounded so earnest that for the next few minutes Bao-yu did in fact concentrate on his revision. Musk handed him a cup of tea to moisten his lips with while he recited. In taking it from her he noticed that she had only a short tunic on over her pantaloons.

‘It gets very cold at this time of night,’ he said. ‘You really ought to. put something else on.’

Musk smiled grimly and pointed at his book.

‘Just forget about me for a while; could you? Get your mind fastened on *this!’*

Hardly had she finished saying this than Parfumee - or Aventurin’ as Bao-yu now called her - came running in from outside in a panic.

‘Oh God! A man’s just jumped down from the wall!’

‘Where? Where?’ cried the others, and began shouting for the older servants to go and look.

To Skybright this scare came as a blessing in disguise. Observing what heavy weather Bao-yu was making of his revision and foreseeing that if he wore himself out by staying up all night he would be in no condition for facing his ordeal in the morning, she had been casting about desperately for some means of rescuing him from it altogether. This panic about an intruder gave her an idea.

‘Why don’t you take advantage of this to get off tomorrow?’ she asked him. ‘Tell them that the shock has made you ill.’

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This was a suggestion after Bao-yu’s own heart. He had the watch called and ordered them to light their lanterns and make a thorough search. But no intruder could be found.

‘I expect one of you young ladies had to go out for something in the dark and being still half-asleep, took the bough of a tree moving in the wind for a man,’ they said.

‘Nonsense!’ said Skybright. ‘You only say that as an excuse, because you haven’t been keeping watch property and you’re afraid of getting into trouble. It wasn’t only one of us who saw him; a whole lot of us did; and Bao-yu was with us. The shock of it has made him quite ill. His face looks terrible and he’s burning hot all over. I shall be going over to Her Ladyship’s presently to get him a sedative. She’s sure to ask me what has upset him. What am I supposed to tell her? That he took fright from looking at a tree?’

This seemed to scare the women, for they made no reply but hurried off again to continue their search. Meanwhile Skybright and Aventurin went off to ask for some pills, deliberately making as big a fuss as possible to make sure that everyone knew that Bao-yu had been taken ill as a result of seeing something alarming in the Garden. Lady Wang sent someone to fetch the medicine for the two girls and gave orders for the members of the watch to make a full investigation. She was particularly anxious that the pages from the inner gate who did night duty at the point nearest to the Garden should be subjected to careful questioning. As a result of these orders there was a general hubbub in the Garden throughout all the rest of that night: lanterns and torches bobbing about and people scurrying to and fro in all directions. At four o’clock in the morning the stewards and stewardesses were summoned from their quarters and ordered to investigate all those servants of either sex who had been on night duty in the mansion.

When Grandmother Jia learned that Bao-yu was suffering from shock, she wanted to know why. The others were obliged to tell her.

‘I didn’t expect a thing like *this* to happen,’ she said. ‘It would be bad enough if the people who are supposed to be keeping us safe at night were merely being careless. What

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worries me is the thought that some of them may be criminals themselves!’

Lady Xing and You-shi had not long since arrived for their morning duty, and Li Wan, Xi-feng and the girls were also there in attendance. None of them dared say anything. In the end it was Tan-chun who,

smiling, stepped forwards and broke the silence.

'It's because Cousin Feng hasn't been very well during these last few months,' she said. 'The servants in the Garden have got much more careless than they used to be. At first it was only once in a while: three or four doing night duty on the same shift getting together for a little game of dice or cards to keep themselves awake. But gradually they became more reckless, until now there are regular little card-schools with their own bankers and forty or fifty strings of cash changing hands at a sitting. A fortnight ago it even reached a point where a fight broke out over the cards.'

'If you knew this at the time, why didn't you tell anyone?' said Grandmother Jia with some asperity.

'I didn't tell Mother because I knew she was busy and not feeling very well,' said Tan-chun. 'I did tell sister-in-law though, and the stewardesses and the women were given several warnings. As a matter of fact, I think they have been a bit more careful since then.'

'You're only a child,' said Grandmother Jia. 'You don't know how serious this is. You think that gambling is a trifling matter and that the only thing to be feared from it is an occasional quarrel. But where there is gambling, there is probably drinking as well; and if there is drinking, probably gates are being left unlocked so that people can slip out to buy things; and when that happens, before you know where you are they will be letting thieves in - the easiest thing in the world when it is dark and there are so few people about. And then - Heaven help. us! - with only you girls living there and the maids and women who wait on you - some of them no better than they should be, I dare say - *anything* could happen. There are things worse than burglary, the mere suspicion of which could have the direst consequences for all of you. No, this is not a matter to be dismissed so airily!'

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After such a snub, Tan-chun could only sit down again in silence.

Xi-feng was still far from well and her usual ebullience was very much in abeyance, but she managed to summon up some energy when she saw how seriously the old lady was displeased. She made a point of observing how unfortunate it was that such things 'had to happen' when she was ill, then, sending for Lin Zhi-xiao's wife and three of the other principal stewardesses, she subjected them to a thorough dressing-down in Grandmother Jia's and everyone else's presence. When Xi-feng had finished with them, Grandmother Jia ordered them to find out who the chief organizers were and all the others who had been taking part in the gambling. She empowered them to offer rewards for information and to punish those who withheld it.

Seeing Grandmother Jia so angry, the stewardesses dared not attempt to cover up for their own kinswomen and friends, of whom there were several among the older women of the watch. Going at once into the Garden, they summoned all the women together and proceeded to grill them, one by one, without distinction of persons. They met at first with a certain amount of resistance, but in the end, as will almost invariably happen when the questioning is sufficiently patient and persistent, the waters subsided and the rocks began to appear. By the time they had finished their interrogations it was established that there were three principal organizers, eight subsidiary ones, and a score or more gamblers who had availed themselves of their services. All of these were taken at once to Grandmother Jia's place, and were soon to be observed kneeling down in rows in her courtyard, knocking their heads upon the pavement and begging for mercy.

Grandmother Jia began by asking for the names of the three principal organizers and the amounts of money in their 'banks'. Of the three it turned out that one was a cousin on the mother's side of Lin Zhi-xiao's wife, one a younger sister of Cook Liu, and the other one Ying-chun's nurse. The other eight organizers, who had operated on a smaller scale, were also named, but their identities need not concern us. Grandmother Jia ordered all the dice and playing-cards to be col-

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lected together and burnt. The money from the banks she ordered to be confiscated and divided up among the other servants. She sentenced the principal offenders to receive forty strokes of the heavy bamboo, to be dismissed, and never to be employed by the family again. The others were to receive twenty strokes, lose three months' pay, and in future be employed in cleaning out the latrines. After passing these sentences, she formally reprimanded Lin Zhi-xiao's wife for having permitted such things to happen.

Lin Zhi-xiao's wife, let down by her own relation and twice rebuked in public, was not the only person present to feel humiliated. Ying-chun, sitting among the other cousins next to Grandmother Jia, felt equally humiliated when it was revealed that her own nurse was one of the principal offenders. Dai-yu, Bao-chai and Tan-chun felt sorry for her and rose to intercede for the old woman.

'Couldn't you, for Ying-chun's sake, let her off this once?' they pleaded. 'She isn't an habitual gambler. It's just that once in a while she gets carried away.

'You none of you know what you are talking about,' said Grandmother Jia. 'These old nannies are all the same. They think that because they suckled you when you were babies it entitles them to special treatment now. They're worse trouble than all the other servants put together, because whenever they have done wrong they think they can always get you to cover up for them. I know. I have had a lot of experience of these people. I need to make an example of one of them, and this one will do very well. You leave this to me. I

know what I am doing.'

The three girls were obliged to let the matter drop.

Soon it was time for the old lady's siesta and all of those present withdrew. But because they knew she was angry, they did not all go back to their own apartments. Some of them waited around so as to be on hand when she had finished resting. You-shi called in at Xi-feng's place to chat, but finding Xi-feng too much out of sorts for conversation, went into the Garden to talk to Li Wan and the girls. Lady Xing, too, after sitting for a while at Lady Wang's place, went off to take a walk in the Garden. She had got no farther than the

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Garden gate, however, when one of the junior maids from Grandmother Jia's apartment, a girl called Simple, almost bumped into her. The girl was walking along chuckling delightedly to herself, intent on some brightly coloured object. Because she was so intent on what she was holding, she had not seen Lady Xing coming towards her and only looked up and checked herself when she was almost upon her.

'Well now, Simple,' said Lady Xing, 'you seem very pleased with yourself. What marvellous thing have you got there? Let me have a look.'

Simple, just turned fourteen, had only recently been selected to help with the rough work in Grandmother Jia's apartment. She had a hefty body, a broad face and an enormous pair of feet. A willing and effective worker in the heavier sort of jobs requiring no intelligence, she was nevertheless so stupid as to be almost half-witted and as ignorant and innocent almost as the day she was born. Much of what she said was unintentionally amusing. Grandmother Jia was endlessly diverted by her and always allowed her mistakes to go unreproved. It was she who had given her the name 'Simple'. When Simple had no work to do, she would often go into the Garden to play. On this occasion she had gone into the Garden to look for crickets behind the rocks of the artificial mountain just inside the gate, and in doing so, had come upon a beautifully embroidered purse. The design embroidered on it consisted not of the usual birds and flowers, but on one side of a pair of naked human figures locked together in an embrace and on the other of some writing. Simple was too innocent to understand what the naked couple were up to. After giving the matter some thought, she had decided that they must be either two demons fighting or two people wrestling, but could not make up her mind which of these was the correct interpretation. She was on her way, chuckling delightedly over her find, to ask Grandmother Jia's opinion on the matter when she nearly ran into Lady Xing.

'I think you've said the right word, Your Ladyship,' said Simple. 'It is a marvellous thing. You just look!'

Lady Xing took the proffered bag. She examined the picture on it with a start.

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'Where did you find this?' she asked, seizing Simple roughly by the arm.

'I found it behind the rocks,' said Simple, 'when I was looking for crickets.'

'Don't tell anyone else about this,' said Lady Xing. 'This is a bad thing, Simple. If you weren't such a simpleton, they would give you a beating just for touching it. Don't ever say a word about it to anyone else!'

Simple turned pale with fright.

'No, no, I won't.'

She made Lady Xing a kotow and went off, round-eyed, with her mouth gaping foolishly open.

Lady Xing looked around her. There were only maids in sight, and she obviously could not give the embroidered purse to one of them, so she stuffed it up her sleeve. She was very puzzled to think where it could have come from; but no trace of what she felt was allowed to show itself on her face as she made her way through the Garden towards Ying-chun's apartment.

Ying-chun was still brooding disconsolately over her nurse's guilt when her mother's arrival was announced. She hurried out to welcome her. As soon as Lady Xing was seated and had been given tea, she began laying into her.

'You're not a child now. If you knew your nurse was doing this sort of thing, for Heaven's sake why couldn't you have spoken to her about it? Other people's nurses don't seem to get into trouble, why does it have to be yours? I don't understand you!'

Ying-chun hung her head and fiddled with her sash. It was some time before she answered.

'I did speak to her about it, on two occasions, but she wouldn't listen to me. What could I do? She's my nurse. She's supposed to tell *me* what to do, not the other way round.'

'Rubbish!' said Lady Xing. 'She's entitled to tell you off if you've done something wrong, but in a case like this where *she* was the guilty one, it was up to you to behave towards her like a mistress. Then, if she still wouldn't obey you, you ought to have come and told me. As it is, you have let things

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slide until everyone knows about it and all the rest of us are involved in the disgrace. I just don't know what you think you are at. Incidentally, if she was banker to a card-school, she must have had to get money from somewhere to start it with. I shouldn't be a bit surprised to find that she'd talked you into lending her clothes or jewellery that she could pawn in order to raise her capital. You're such a soft, flabby creature, you'd be

just as likely as not to lend them to her. Well all I can say is, if she has and you don't get them back from her, it's no good coming to me for the money, for I've none to give you; so what you will do when festival time comes and you need your things I can't imagine.'

Ying-chun continued to hang her head and say nothing. Lady Xing found her unresponsiveness provoking.

'Your mother was one of Sir She's chamber-wives,' she said, 'and your Cousin Tan's mother was a chamber-wife as well, so you and she had the same sort of start in life. As a matter of fact your mother was ten times better than that Zhao woman, so you ought by rights to be better than your Cousin Tan. But you're not. You're not her equal in any single respect. I don't know, I'd have been better off without any children at all. Those I have only make me look ridiculous.'

'Mrs Lian is here,' one of the servants announced.

'Huh!' said Lady Xing scornfully; and then again, 'Huh!'

'Tell her to go back home and take care of her illness,' she said to the waiting servant. 'Tell her I have no need of her services.'

As that servant went out, another one, who had been sent to Grandmother Jia's place to act as a look-out, came in to report that the old lady was now awake. Lady Xing got up to go. Ying-chun saw her out as far as the courtyard gate.

'There you are!' said Tangerine when Ying-chun got back. 'When I told you the other day that that pearl-and-gold phoenix had disappeared, you wouldn't even ask about it. I *told* you that Nannie had probably nicked it to pawn, but you wouldn't believe me. You said, "I expect Chess is looking after it." Well, I asked Chess, because although she is in, she is still perfectly clear in her mind, and she said, "No, I haven't touched it. It ought still to be in the casket on the bookshelf,

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ready for wearing at the Mid-Autumn festival." Now why don't you send someone to Nannie right away and ask her what she's done with it?'

'There's no need to ask,' said Ying-chun. 'It's perfectly obvious that she took it because she was temporarily out of cash and needed the money from it to tide her over. She quietly removed it when no one was looking, and I assumed that after a few days had gone by, when she was in funds again, she would redeem it and quietly slip it back again. I expect she forgot. In any case, there's not much point in asking her after what has happened today.'

'She never forgot!' said Tangerine. 'She knew from past experience that you'd never do anything, that's why she didn't put it back. I think I know what to do, though. I'll go and tell Mrs Lian about it, and either she'll ask Nannie about it herself, or better still, she'll send someone with a few strings of cash round to the pawnshop and get it back for you straight away.'

'You'll do no such thing!' said Ying-chun. 'Much better leave well alone. I'd rather do without the thing than stir up a lot more trouble.'

'Why are you so feeble?' said Tangerine exasperatedly. 'All this "saving trouble"! One of these days they'll carry you off with the loot! I'm going, anyway.'

She began to do so. Ying-chun said nothing and made no attempt to prevent her. Unknown to them both, however, Zhu-er's wife - the daughter-in-law of the old nurse they were talking about - had all this time been listening outside the door. She had come intending to ask Ying-chun to put in a plea for her mother-in-law, but held back when she heard Ying-chun and Tangerine discussing the pearl-and-gold phoenix.

Because Ying-chun was so weak and unassertive, Zhu-er's wife would not normally have regarded the discovery by her of one of her mother-in-law's depredations as a matter of very much consequence; but when she heard Tangerine insisting that Xi-feng should be informed, she could see that unless something were done to prevent this, the consequences could be very serious indeed. At this point, therefore, she hurried in to try and stop her.

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'Now, now, Miss Tangerine,' she said, smiling rather unnaturally, 'don't go making trouble! Our old missus was a bit silly about that pearl-and-gold phoenix, I will admit. She'd lost a bit at the cards and couldn't recoup, so she took it as a loan. Naturally she never expected that all this trouble would break out before she'd had a chance to put it back. But be that as it may, it's the mistress's property, and we've no intention of forgetting about it. Sooner or later we fully intend to redeem it for her. I'd hardly be here now if we didn't, would I? I've come to ask the mistress, for the sake of the milk she sucked from her as a baby, to go to Her Old Ladyship and plead with her for our old missus.'

'My dear good woman,' said Ying-chun, 'if that is what you are hoping for, then the sooner you disabuse yourself of that hope the better. I am *not* going to plead for your motherin-law. You can wait from now until this time next year if you like, but I will still not do it Miss Bao and Miss Lin and the others have tried already and Her Old Ladyship refused to listen to them. She's even less likely to listen to me on my own. I have already put up with enough humiliation for one day; I have no intention of going to look for more.'

'Whether or not you return that phoenix is one thing and whether or not the mistress goes to plead for your

mother-in-law is another,' said Tangerine. 'Don't try to confuse the issue. I hope you're not suggesting that if the mistress doesn't do what you ask for your mother-in-law, *you* won't redeem the phoenix? I think you ought to redeem the phoenix first and start talking about that other matter after you have brought it back.'

Ying-chun's refusal and Tangerine's sharp rebuke put Zhuer's wife out of countenance and left her momentarily at a loss for words, but she quickly found her tongue again and, as if openly contemptuous of Ying-chun's easy-going nature, began taking noisy issue with Tangerine in her mistress's presence.

'Don't be so high and mighty, Miss Tangerine! If you look around at the other apartments in this household, you'll find that there isn't a single one in which the nannies don't take some advantage of their position to get a few perks. I don't

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see why only in our case you should be so pernickety. If you are a bit light-fingered, of course, that's another matter! Ever since Miss Xing came to live with us, Lady Xing has insisted on a tad a month being stopped out of her allowance to help pay for her mother. That means that though we now have two mistresses here in the place of one - with all the extra expenses that that entails - we are having to manage on less money a month instead of more. It's hardly surprising that the mistresses are always running short. And when they do, who is it that steps in and pays? We do. One way and another, we must have paid out at least thirty taels by now, and from what I can see, it was money down the drain.'

'Thirty taels?' said Tangerine indignantly. 'How do you make that out? Just tell me one or two of the things the mistress is supposed to have asked you for.'

Ying-chun had been made uneasy by the open reference to her mother's meanness.

'Now that's enough!' she told the woman. 'If you can't give the phoenix back, you can't. There's no need to go dragging all these other matters into it and shouting them around for everyone else to hear. I don't want the thing, anyway. If mother asks me about it, I shall tell her I've lost it. At least you won't have anything to worry about, so you might just as well go away and rest. What's the point of making all this fuss?'

She told Tangerine to pour her some tea. Tangerine was both angry and alarmed.

It's all very well for *you* to take that way out, miss, but what about us? Not content with depriving you of your gold phoenix, this woman is now pretending that you've been spending their money and proposing to write off the phoenix to offset what they're supposed to have given you. If Lady Xing hears that and asks how you came to be spending so much, it's we servants who will take the blame. It isn't fair!'

She burst into tears. Chess, who, as she lay ill in bed, had been listening with growing impatience to what the others were saying, could now contain herself no longer. Getting out of bed, she dragged herself over to take Tangerine's part in the argument. Ying-chun, finding that her single attempt at

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ending it had failed, picked up a volume of *Tai-shang's Heavenly Rewards and Punishments* and began to read.

While Zhu-er's wife and the two maids were still at it hammer and tongs, Bao-chai, Dai-yu, Bao-qin and Tan-chun arrived. Concerned that Ying-chun might still be feeling distressed about her nurse, they had met together by pre-arrangement and come over to try and cheer her up. Sounds of the wrangling going on inside were distinctly audible as they entered her courtyard. Tan-chun walked over and, peeping through the window, saw Ying-chun half-reclining on the day-bed reading a book, oblivious to the noisy argument that was going on only a few feet away from her. She laughed. Just at that moment two junior maids raised the portiere for the visitors and announced their arrival.

At once Ying-chun put her book down and rose to welcome them. The sight of these newcomers - particularly as Tan-chun was one of them - caused the woman to stop of her own accord and she took the opportunity of slipping quietly outside.

'Who was that talking in here just now ?' said Tan-chun as she took a seat. 'It sounded as if someone was having an argument.'

'Oh, nothing,' said Ying-chun, pleasantly. 'Probably only the servants making their usual fuss about nothing. Certainly not anything worth inquiring about.'

'I'm sure I heard something about a "golden phoenix" just now,' said Tan-chun. 'I distinctly heard someone say, "When she's short of money, she always asks us servants for some." When *who's* short of money? Not *you*, Ying, surely? *You* don't ask the servants for money, do you?'

'You're absolutely right, miss, she most certainly does not,' said Chess and Tangerine indignantly.

Tan-chun smiled.

'Well, Ying, if it wasn't *you* the woman I heard was talking about, perhaps it was *me?* You'd better call her inside again and let me ask her.'

'Now you're being ridiculous,' said Ying-chun, laughing. 'Why be like this? It has absolutely nothing to do with you.'

'There you are wrong,' said Tan-chun. 'You and I are in

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the same boat. Our circumstances are very similar. What she says affects me as much as it does you. It would be just the same if you were to hear someone at my place complaining about me. You would feel almost as though you were being criticized yourself. As mistresses, you and I are above talking to servants about the petty cash. We may ask them for *things* sometimes, as and when we require them, but that is another matter. Tell me, though: how did a "pearl-and-gold phoenix" come to be mixed up in this discussion?'

Zhu-er's wife, terrified lest Tangerine should seize this opportunity to denounce her, came rushing in at this point and tried to put Tan-chun off the scent with her own extremely garbled account of what had happened. But Tan-chun showed that she had a better understanding of the case than the woman supposed.

'I think you are being very stupid,' she said smilingly. 'What you *ought* to do, now that your mother-in-law has already got herself into trouble, is to go to Mrs Lian before the money confiscated has been divided up and ask if you can have some of it back to redeem this jewellery with. Ideally, of course, it would have been better if you could have redeemed it before all this trouble broke out and saved yourselves a bit of face. But now that you have no face left to save, you'd much better make a clean breast of it and get the money. After all, your mother-in-law has already been found guilty. However many crimes she's committed, they can only cut her head off once. You take my advice. Go round to Mrs Lian's place as soon as possible and make a clean breast of it. Standing around here shouting is not going to get you anywhere!'

The woman was forced to admit that Tan-chun's reading of the situation was correct. But she was too scared to go to Xi-feng and confess.

'If I hadn't heard you talking about this, it would have been none of my business,' said Tan-chun. 'But now that I *have* heard, I think you had better let me take over and do the explaining for you.'

Unknown to the others, Tan-chun had tipped Scribe the wink a minute or two previously and Scribe had slipped out-

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side to summon help. It was no surprise to Tan-chun, therefore, that Patience should have walked in just as she was saying this; but to the others her appearance at that moment was little short of miraculous. Bao-qin clapped her hands delightedly.

'I always knew Cousin Tan was a witch. Now here comes her familiar spirit!'

'It's not witchcraft, it's generalship,' said Dai-yu. 'Don't you remember what it says in *The Art of War?*

A shy maiden in defence, but swift as a hare in the attack.

In good generalship surprise is of the essence.'

A look from Bao-chai caused the two girls to drop their bantering and talk of something else while Tan-chun addressed herself to the new arrival.

'Is your mistress any better yet?' she asked Patience. 'She seems to have completely lost her grip on things since she had this illness. It's very unfortunate for people like me who have to put up with the consequences.

'Oh?' said Patience in some surprise. 'Has someone been giving you trouble, miss? If you will let me know what I can do, I am at your disposal.'

Zhu-er's wife was now in a panic. She bounded up to Patience and was all over her before Tan-chun could get a word in.

'Sit down while I tell you, Miss Patience. I can explain it all.'

Patience gave her a long, hard look.

'Miss Tan and I are talking. What right have you to come butting in like this? If you had any manners at all, you wouldn't even be in this room, you'd be waiting respectfully outside. Whoever heard of an outside servant going into one of the young mistresses' apartments without being asked?'

'Manners?' said Tangerine. 'You won't find many around here. People barge in and out of this apartment as they please.'

'It's your fault then if they do,' said Patience sharply. 'If Miss Ying is too gentle to do so, you ought to throw them out yourselves and then go and report them to Her Ladyship.'

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Zhu-er's wife reddened at Patience's rebuke and took herself outside.

'Now I can answer your question,' Tan-chun said to Patience. 'This is not actually my affair. If it were, perhaps I shouldn't have minded quite so much. What happened is that this woman's mother-in-law, trading on the fact that she used to be Miss Ying's wet-nurse when she was a baby and taking advantage of Miss Ying's easy-going nature, took some of her jewellery without telling her in order to raise money for her gambling. As if that wasn't enough, this woman had the gall to pretend that Miss Ying owed them money in order that she could blackmail her into interceding for her mother-in-law. I found her and these two maids shouting at each other in Miss Ying's bedroom while Miss Ying sat by helpless. Now that you are here, I

should like to ask you this question. Is this woman really so thick-witted that she doesn't know any better, or has someone else put her up to this? I mean, is there some plan to undermine Miss Ying first and then, when she is safely out of the way, to get to work on me and on Miss Xi?'

'Oh *miss!'* said Patience, endeavouring to treat the question as a joke, 'how *could* you? Mrs Lian is not as bad as that!'

'I'm sure I don't know,' said Tan-chun coldly. 'You know the saying: "Like grieves for like; for when the lips are gone, the teeth will be cold." When I saw what was happening to Miss Ying, I couldn't help feeling nervous.'

Patience turned to Ying-chun questioningly.

'It would be easy enough to deal with this matter if it weren't that this woman is the wife of your foster-brother. It's really up to you, miss.'

Ying-chun had all this time been sitting shoulder to shoulder with Bao-chai, reading one of the stories in *Rewards-and-Punishments.* She had not even heard what Tan-chun had been saying and had only the haziest idea what was required of her when she suddenly found herself being addressed. She smiled back, however, and did her best to oblige.

'Don't ask *me!'* she said. 'There's absolutely nothing that *I* can do about it. If they will go getting themselves into trouble, they must face the consequences. All I can say is that I can't do anything to get their punishment reduced and I

won't do anything to increase it. As for that object they took from me without telling me, if they do bring it back I shall be happy to receive it; if they don't bring it back I shall not ask them for it. If either of Their Ladyships should ask me about it, I shall keep the facts hidden from them if I can do so honourably, in which case these people may consider themselves lucky; but if I can't, I shall just have to tell them the truth. It is quite out of the question that I should deliberately deceive Their Ladyships in order to cover up for them. You say I am too easy-going and indecisive: if you know of a better way of dealing with this matter that is both fool-proof and will not upset Their Ladyships, by all means go ahead with it; I shall certainly not interfere.'

The others were much amused by this answer.

'Ying-chun makes me think of that monk who went on discussing theological matters while wolves and tigers prowled outside in his courtyard,' said Dai-yu laughing. 'How on earth would she have controlled a great household like ours if she had been a man?'

'That's begging the question,' said Ying-chun, smiling. 'There are plenty of men who live off the fat of the land but who, in a crisis, are no better at dealing with things than I. Anyway, *Tai-shang* says that of all works of merit helping people when they are in trouble is the greatest. I may not be able to help anyone, but at least I am not going out of my way to make things worse for them. What is the point of gratuitously making enemies or exerting oneself for ends from which no one will benefit?'

Before she had finished, another visitor was heard arriving in the courtyard. Who this was will be revealed in the following chapter.

CHAPTER 74

Lady Wang authorizes a raid
on Prospect Garden
And Jia Xi-chun breaks off relations
with Ning-guo House

Patience was greatly amused by the tone of Ying-chun's answer to her inquiry. Ying-chun's further self-justification in reply to Dai-yu's comment was cut short by the arrival of another visitor. It was at this point that we concluded the last chapter.

The visitor was Bao-yu. When it was known that one of the chief organizers of the gambling was Cook Liu's younger sister, Cook Liu's enemies in the Garden regarded this as a good opportunity for making another attempt to oust her from her kitchen. Going in a body to Xi-feng, they accused her of being in partnership with her sister and receiving equal shares of her takings, and they demanded that Xi-feng should take appropriate action to punish her. Cook Liu, when she heard this, was at first panic-stricken; then, remembering her friends at **Green** Delights, she hurried over there, taking great care that nobody saw her on the way, and begged Skybright and Aventurin to tell Bao-yu what had happened. It occurred to Bao-yu, when they told him, that as Ying-chun's nurse was in trouble for the same offence, it would be more effective to join forces with Ying-chun in pleading for clemency than to go along on his own and plead only

for Cook Liu. It was in order to discuss this matter that he had come to see Ying-chun. Unfortunately, when he arrived, he found that she was not alone.
'Are you better now?' the others asked him. (They supposed that he was still suffering from shock.) 'What have you come for?'
He could not state the real purpose of his visit in front of so many people and merely told them that he had come 'to see

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how Ying-chun was getting on'. The others believed him, and a desultory conversation followed about nothing in particular.
Patience now went off to deal with the pearl-and-gold phoenix. Zhu-er's wife followed at her elbow, begging to be let off.
'For charity's sake, don't tell her, miss! I promise you faithfully, that phoenix will be redeemed.'
'So you keep saying,' said Patience, drily. 'What a pity you couldn't have redeemed it a bit sooner and saved yourself this trouble! You want to wriggle out of this somehow without telling her, don't you? Well, I can't say that *I* am very keen on informing against you, myself. I'll tell you what: you get that thing back as quickly as possible and hand it over to me, and I won't say anything about it to my mistress.'
Zhu-er's wife was so relieved that she went down on her knees to thank her.
'You carry on now with whatever you are doing, miss. I'll have it ready for you by this evening. I'll bring it to show you as soon as I've redeemed it, and then I'll take it back to Miss Ying's. How will that be?'
'All right,' said Patience. 'But if you don't turn up with it this evening, you will have only yourself to blame for what happens.'
The two young women then went their separate ways.
'Well?' said Xi-feng, when Patience got back to her apartment. 'What did Miss Tan want you for?'
'She was worried that you might have been fretting over this gambling business,' said Patience, smiling. 'She asked me how you'd been eating this last day or two.'
'That's very kind of her,' said Xi-feng. 'Oh, there's more trouble, by the way. Some of them have just been here accusing Cook Liu of being mixed up in the gambling business with her sister. They're saying, in fact, that she was the real organizer. However, remembering how insistent you always are that I should let well alone and only think of my health, I took no action. Last time I ignored your advice and had someone punished, I not only offended Lady Xing but also ended up by making myself ill. So this time I knew better. They can do as they please, *I* don't care. Someone else can do the worry-

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ing. I have nearly destroyed myself by worrying and the only result of it is that everyone hates me. Very well. Now all I am going to think about is getting better. And when I am better, I am going to turn myself into a Mr Yes-yes. No matter what frightful things the others get up to, I shall just say "Yes, yes" when I hear about them. "Yes, yes," I shall say, and not give them a single other thought!'
'If only you *would* be like that,' said Patience smiling, 'what a blessing it would be for us all!'
At that moment Jia Lian came in, sighing and striking his hands together with vexation.
'More trouble I When I borrowed that stuff from Faithful the other day to pawn, how could Mother have got to hear about it? She had me over there just now and asked me to borrow two hundred taels for her. She said she wanted it for the Mid-Autumn festival. I said I didn't know who I could borrow two hundred taels from at the moment. "If you can't borrow the money, you can easily find something to raise it on," she said. "Don't always make excuses. Don't know who to borrow it from, indeed! You could spirit all those things out of Lady Jia's room when you chose to, yet now you make difficulties about raising a paltry two hundred taels for me! You're lucky I haven't told anyone what you've been up to." I'm certain Mother isn't really short of money. This is sheer, gratuitous trouble-making on her part.'
'There were no outsiders here on that occasion,' said Xi-feng. 'I wonder how the news could have leaked out.'
Patience, who had been listening to their conversation, tried hard to remember who had been present. After some moments it came back to her.
'I know. There was no one else here that day while you were talking to Faithful, but in the evening, when she sent the stuff round, that mother of Simple's who works for Her Old Ladyship called in with some laundry and afterwards sat quite a long while talking in the kitchen. If she saw that great trunk there, it would have been only natural to ask what was inside it, and the maids might well have told her, without realizing that they were not supposed to. I wouldn't be at all surprised if that's how it got about.'
She called some of the junior maids in to question them.

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'Which of you told Simple's mother the other day what was in that trunk?'
The maids knelt down in terror and swore by the most sacred oaths that they had said nothing.

‘We’re always most careful not to say too much to anyone. When people ask us anything, we always say that we don’t know. We’d certainly never have told her about *that!’*
Xi-feng considered the probabilities.
‘Somehow I don’t think they *would* have told her. At all events, there is no point in harrving them about it now. We shall just have to put that question behind us. The important thing now is to make sure that Mother gets what she wants. I’d rather we went short ourselves than risk her making another lot of trouble.’ She turned to Patience. ‘Take some of my gold things again and get us another two hundred taels. -As soon as she has the money ready, you can take it to Mother immediately, and that should be the end of the matter,’ she told Jia Lian.
‘Might as well raise four hundred taels while you are about it,’ said Jia Lian. ‘We could do with another two hundred ourselves.’
‘I don’t see that at all,’ said Xi-feng. ‘We don’t really need two hundred taels ourselves. And in any case, if we raise so much now, where is the money corning from later for getting the things out of pawn?’
Patience fetched the now familiar gold necklaces and told Brightie’s wife to take them to the pawnshop. Soon afterwards Brightie’s wife was back again with the cash and Jia Lian went in person to hand it over to his mother.
While Jia Lian was taking the money to Lady Xing, Xi-feng and Patience continued to ask themselves who could have leaked the information about the surreptitious removal of Grandmother Jia’s valuables.
‘It’s too bad!’ said Xi-feng. ‘Poor Faithful will be in trouble over this, and all because of us.’
While they were still wondering who it could have been, Lady Wang was announced. This was a surprise, for Xi-feng could think of no reason why she should be visiting them. She and Patience hurried out to greet her.
Lady Wang had only one maid, a trusted junior, in attend-

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ance. There was an angry expression on her face and she walked swiftly through the house into the inner room and sat down grimly on the kang, all without uttering a word. Xi-feng, concealing her apprehension behind a smile, hurriedly served her with tea.
‘It’s an unusual honour to have you here, Aunt.’
‘Patience, leave the room!’ Lady Wang commanded.
‘Yes’m,’ said Patience, wondering what on earth could be the matter, and hurried out, taking all the other maids with her. She stood by the outer door until they were all outside, then closed it after her and sat down at the top of the steps to prevent anyone going in.
As Xi-feng, now thoroughly alarmed, watched her aunt and wondered why she had come, Lady Wang, who appeared to be on the point of weeping, drew an embroidered pouch from her sleeve and threw it on the kang.
‘Look at that!’
Xi-feng hastily picked it up and found herself, to her great surprise, looking at a lewd picture, beautifully embroidered in silks.
‘Where did you get it from?’ she asked.
The tears that had collected in Lady Wang’s eyes pouted down her cheeks now and the voice in which she answered was choked and trembling.
‘Where did *I* get it from? *I* sit all day at the bottom of a well. As you seemed such a conscientious young woman, I thought I could leave things to you and enjoy some leisure, but it seems that you are no better at managing than I. Fancy leaving a thing like that in the Garden - on a rockery, too, in broad daylight, where everyone could see it! It was picked up by one of Grandmother’s maids. If your mother-in-law hadn’t fortunately spotted the girl carrying it, it would have gone straight to Grandmother. I think it’s for *you* to tell *me* how it came to be dropped there.’
It was Xi-feng’s turn to look angry.
‘How do you know it’s mine?’
Lady Wang sighed and shed a few more tears.
‘How can you ask me that? Who in this household apart from you and Lian *could* a thing like this belong to? The old

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women would have no use for a thing like this and none of the girls would know where to get one from. Obviously that wretched, worthless Lian must have got hold of it from somewhere; and you, treating it, I suppose, as a great joke, were only too happy to receive it from him. I know that young couples do go in for this sort of thing; why try to deny it? But the young people in the Garden are still innocent. Suppose one of their maids had picked it up and shown it to them? It doesn't bear thinking of. Or suppose a maid had picked it up and told someone from outside that she had found it in the Garden? What sort of reputation would that leave our family with? It would be better to die than that such a thing should happen.'

A mixture of shame and exasperation caused the blood to rush into Xi-feng's face. She fell on her knees beside the kang. There were tears in her own eyes when she answered, but they were tears of anger.

'What you say is no doubt very reasonable, Aunt, and I have no wish to argue with you, but I really *don't* own anything like this and I really must ask you to reconsider one or two of the things you have said. First of all, take another look at this bag. It wasn't made here. One can see at a glance that it is a poor commercial imitation of "palace" embroidery. Even the tassels are the kind you would buy outside. I may be young and frivolous, but I'd hardly be likely to want a trashy thing like this. Secondly, this isn't the sort of thing one would carry around with one. Even if it *were* mine, I should keep it hidden somewhere in a secret place, not walk around with it on my person, particularly if I were going into the Garden. The girls and I are always holding each other and pulling each other about, so that ifI were wearing a thing like this, it would very quickly get noticed, and what should I feel like then, if one of the girls or one of the maids were to look at it? Thirdly, I may be the only young married woman with a husband *in the family,* but there are plenty of even younger married women among the servants who are often in and out of the Garden. How can you be so sure that it wasn't one of them who dropped this bag? Then there are those younger concubines of Sir She's, like Carmine and Azure. Mother often

takes one or two of them with her when she goes into the Garden. They would be even more likely to own a thing like this. And Zhen's wife herself isn't all that old, not to mention Lovey and Dove, whom she frequently takes with her when she goes there. How do you know it doesn't belong to one of them? And in any case, there are so many maids in the Garden, how can you be so sure that *all* of them are pure? There may be one or two of the older ones who are not so innocent. One of them could have slipped out on some pretext or other when no one was looking to flirt with the pages on the inner gate and got it from one of them. It's perfectly possible. But I can assure you that *I* have never possessed a thing like this, and I know that Patience hasn't either. So I really must ask you to reconsider.'

Lady Wang was somewhat overwhelmed by this torrent of words, but had to admit their reasonableness.

'You can get up,' she said with a sigh. 'It was wrong of me to accuse you. I ought to have known that a young woman of your breeding would not be guilty of such unseemliness. I am afraid I was overwrought and allowed anger to get the better of me. But what am I to do? Your mother-in-law saw fit to send this thing round to me by a messenger. I was terribly upset when I unwrapped it and saw what it was.'

'The first thing to do is to try not to be so upset,' said Xi-feng. 'If the servants become aware that something is wrong, the chances of Grandmother getting to hear about it will be much greater. If we can remain cool and carry out our investigations in secret, we are much more likely to get at the truth, and even if we don't, no one outside is going to be any the wiser. We should pick four or five of our most trusted servants to do the investigating - people like Thou Rui's wife and Brightie's wife who can be relied upon not to talk - and send them into the Garden as replacements of the women who have been dismissed. The pretext for their investigations can be that there are various things connected with the gambling that still remain to be cleared

up. The other thing we must do something about is the number of the maids. There are far too many of them. As they get older, they begin to get grown-up ideas, and one can never be quite sure

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that they may not get up to some mischief. It's no good waiting until something has actually happened before doing anything, because then it will already be too late; on the other hand to begin large-scale dismissals straight away would be very distressing for the girls and probably for us as well. It would be better to wait until each maid either reaches a certain age or shows signs of growing insubordinate, and then use the first slip she makes as grounds for dismissing her and marrying her to one of the boys. In that way we can both avoid having trouble and at the same time make a considerable reduction in our expenses.'

Lady Wang sighed.

'You are of course right. But in fairness to our girls I think it must be said that they are already making do with the absolute minimum of service. Not one of them has more than two or three maids who are the least bit of use. The others are like a pack of mischievous children. And I am not the only one who would feel unhappy about cutting down the numbers; I think it highly probable that Grandmother, too, would object. After all, things may be a bit difficult at present, but we can't be all *that* poor. I wouldn't lay claim to any great riches, but I think I may perhaps be a little bit better off than the rest of you. So if there is any talk of economy, I'd rather do without myself than see the girls suffer. The important thing now is to call in Thou Rui's wife and one or two of our other women and get them to begin these secret investigations for us as quickly as possible.'

Xi-feng at once called Patience in and explained what was wanted. Patience went out again and within a short time had assembled five of Lady Wang's and Xi-feng's most trusted retainers: Zhou Rui's wife, Wu Xing's wife and Zheng Hua's wife from among Lady Wang's servants and Brightie's wife and Happy's wife from among Xi-feng's. Lady Wang thought they might not be enough for the sort of detailed investigation she had in mind. While she was wondering who else to get, Wang Shan-bao's wife walked in.

Wang Shan-bao's wife, like Goody Fei, was one of the servants who had been with Lady Xing since her childhood and accompanied her when she came to the Jia household as a

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bride. It was she, in fact, who had brought the embroidered bag to Lady Wang, and she had trailed along to Xi-feng's place out of curiosity, to see what she would do about the discovery. Lady Wang's past observation of these trusted henchwomen of her sister-in-law had not been sufficient to make her mistrust them and she welcomed this new arrival as a reinforcement.

'Ah, just the person!' she said as she caught sight of her. 'After you have reported back to your mistress, you will be able to go with these others into the Garden and keep an eye on them for me.'

On a number of past visits to the Garden Wang Shan-bao's wife had been greatly put out by the failure of the maids there to show her the respect and consideration that she felt to be her due; but dearly as she would have liked to teach those young creatures a lesson, she had not so far found a sufficient pretext for doing so. This discovery of an obscene object in the Garden was, in her eyes, a godsend, and her recruitment by Lady Wang to play a part in the investigations arising out of it was the kind of opportunity she had dreamed of.

'We'll get to the bottom of this easy enough, don't you worry, madam,' she said. 'What you need in that Garden is more discipline, if you don't mind my saying so, and has been for some time. To see the way those young maids carry on there, you would think they were princesses. They can have that whole place in an uproar, yet none of us dares to breathe a word against them, for we know that if we did, they would go

running off to their young mistresses and get them to complain that it's *them* we have been criticizing: and that is a charge which none of us is willing to stand up to.'
Lady Wang nodded.
'Yes, I suppose the girls who wait on the young mistresses *are* inclined to be a bit spoiled.'
'The young mistresses' maids are by no means the worst,' said Wang Shan-bao's wife. 'The worst of the lot is that Skybright that works in Bao-yu's room. Because she's a bit better-looking than the others and a bit readier with her tongue, she goes around dolled up all the time like a Xi-shi, putting everyone else in their place. She likes the sound of

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her own voice, does that young woman, and she likes to have her own way. If you say the slightest little thing to offend her, up fly her eyebrows and she will begin telling you exactly what she thinks of you. Oh, she's a proper little madam, that one! Not much of the maidservant about *her!'*
A sudden recollection seemed to strike Lady Wang while Wang Shan-bao's wife was speaking. She turned to Xi-feng questioningly.
'I remember last time I was in the Garden with Lady Jia seeing a maid, a snaky-waisted girl with narrow, sloping shoulders and something of your Cousin Lin about the eyes, shouting at one of the junior maids, and thinking what a thoroughly objectionable young woman she must be. I didn't say anything at the time because I was with Lady Jia. I meant to try and find out who she was afterwards, but I forgot. I wonder if this is the same girl? It sounds uncommonly like her.'
'Skybright is certainly the best-looking of the maids,' said Xi-feng cautiously, 'and as regards her behaviour and manner of speaking, I suppose you could say she is. inclined to be a little too free. The person you describe certainly sounds as if it *might* have been her, but as I wasn't myself there at the time, I wouldn't like to say for sure that it was.'
'There's no need to go on wondering,' said Wang Shanbao's wife. 'We can call her here this minute and Her Ladyship can see for herself whether it's her or not.'
'Whenever I see anyone from Bao-yu's room, it's always either Aroma or Musk,' said Lady Wang. 'Both of them are the kind of plain, simple girl I like. They would never send the kind of girl we are talking about to see me because they know that that is just the sort of creature I cannot abide. Oh dear! One can't help wondering, when a thing like this happens: suppose Bao-yu were to be corrupted by a little harpy like that...
After some moments' reflection, she called in her own maid from outside.
'I want you to go over to Master Bao's place and say that there is something I want to ask them about. Say that I would

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rather Aroma and Musk stayed behind to look after Bao-yu. There is a girl there called Skybright who is very intelligent. You can tell *her* to come. Say she is to come over with you straight away. You are not to say anything to her on the way here.'
'Yes, my lady,' said the maid, and hurried off to **Green** Delights.
When she arrived Skybright, who had recently been feeling far from well, was just getting up from a nap and was only half awake: but as the order said 'Come at once', she had to go with the maid as she was, with no time to make herself presentable. However, this did not unduly concern her. Knowing Lady Wang's aversion to people of her type, she would normally have felt some nervousness about having to appear before her. On this occasion she took comfort from the fact that her indisposition over the last few days had caused her to neglect her appearance. Dowdiness would count in her favour.

Alas! When she arrived in Xi-feng's room, Lady Wang took one look at this languid vision with its tousled hair, crooked hairpins and rumpled dress and felt all the anger she had just conquered rising up again inside her - particularly when she recognized this as being almost certainly the same girl as the one who had aroused her ire on that previous occasion a month before in the Garden.

'Good gracious me I' she exclaimed sarcastically. 'What swooning Xi-shi have we here? For whose benefit do you go around in this extraordinary get-up? Don't imagine I don't know what your little game is, young lady! I may not have done anything about you yet, but I'll have the skin off you one of these days! - Is Bao-yu any better?'

Though shaken by the unexpectedness of this onslaught, Skybright realized at once that someone must have been saying things about her. And although understandably angry, she managed to keep her head. She was too intelligent not to realize that the question about Bao-yu was a trap. She knelt to answer it.

'I don't often go into Bao-yu's room, madam, or see much of him, so I am afraid I am not able to tell you. It's

Aroma and Musk who mostly wait on him. They would be able to give Your Ladyship an answer.'

'Little liar!' said Lady Wang. 'You've got eyes in your head, haven't you? What's the good of employing you if you can't even tell me whether he's well or not?'

'I used to be Her Old Ladyship's maid,' said Skybright. 'She selected me for night duty in the outer room at **Green** Delights because she thought that, going to live in the big, empty Garden he might get frightened at night. I told Her Old Ladyship that I was too stupid to work for Bao-yu, but that only made her angry. She said, "I'm not asking you to wait on him personally. You don't need to be clever for the job I'm asking you to do." So after that I had to go. I don't see him very often. He might call me in once or twice every ten days or so to ask me about something and I just answer him and go back to my work. His meals and all the personal service are looked after either by the older servants and nannies or by Aroma and Musk and Ripple. Whenever I've got time for it, I still have a lot of Her Old Ladyship's sewing to do. I'm afraid I don't pay much attention to what Bao-yu is doing. I will do so in future, if Your Ladyship wishes me to.'

Lady Wang was completely taken in.

'Please don't trouble yourself,' she said hastily. 'Holy name! I'm only too happy to learn that you *don't* see much of him. So you were given to him by Her Old Ladyship. I suppose in that case I shall have to see her first before I can dismiss you.'

She turned to Wang Shan-hao's wife.

'When you and the others go into the Garden, I want you to take particular care that this girl is kept well away from Bao-yu. Make sure that she doesn't sleep in the same room. I shall be dealing with her in a few days' time, when I have had a chance of speaking about her to Her Old Ladyship.'

As she turned again momentarily towards Skybright, her voice rose almost into a shout.

'Get out of here! The sight of you standing there like a young trollop offends my eyes! Who gave you permission anyway to dress yourself up in that garish fashion?'

Skybright left the room, utterly crushed. She buried her

face in her handkerchief as soon as she was outside the door and wept into it every step of the way back to **Green** Delights.

Meanwhile Lady Wang was telling Xi-feng how much she regretted her remissness in having allowed creatures like Skybright to inhabit the Garden for so long undisturbed.

'I wish I had had the energy to keep a closer watch on things,' she said. I never expected to find a young flibbertigibbet like that in the Garden. And I suppose if there is one there like that, there are likely to be others like it as well.'

Xi-feng could see that Lady Wang was too incensed to reason with; and however much she might have said to the point, she would not in any case have dared to do so in front of Wang Shan-bao's wife, who was one of her mother-in-law's principal informants and a most notorious stirrer-up of trouble. She merely lowered her head, therefore, and murmured assent.

It was Wang Shan-bao's wife who spoke.

'Don't upset yourself, my lady. Leave all these little things to me. There's a very easy way of getting to the bottom of this business. Tonight, when the Garden gates have been shut and there is no chance of word getting through inside, we'll make a surprise visit and search all the maids' rooms in each of the apartments. Whoever owned this thing we're trying to find out about must have other things like it as well, so if we find anything like it in our search, we shall have found the owner.

'That sounds like a good idea,' said Lady Wang. 'We shall never get anywhere unless we do something like that. -What do you think?' she asked Xi-feng.

Xi-feng deemed it impolitic to disagree.

'If you think it's all right, Aunt, I should let her do it.

'I *do* think it's all right,' said Lady Wang emphatically. 'Unless we do it this way, we might spend a year investigating and still get nowhere.'

A raid was accordingly planned for that very evening. After dinner, when Grandmother Jia had retired for the night and the cousins had all returned to their apartments, Wang Shan-bao's wife, having first asked Xi-feng to accompany her, led her litile party into the Garden. After ordering all the

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side gates to be closed, she set about searching immediately, beginning with the room just inside the Garden gate which was used by the women of the night watch as a rendez-vous. Nothing of interest was discovered there except for a few candle-ends and a little leftover lamp-oil which someone had evidently put by to take home. However, Wang Shan-bao's wife solemnly pronounced them to be stolen property: no one was to touch these things, she said, until Lady Wang had been informed and the appropriate steps had been taken. They proceeded to **Green** Delights, barring the courtyard gates after them as soon as they were inside.

Bao-yu was still worrying about Skybright when this party of women came bursting into his courtyard and, without a word of explanation, walked straight into the part of the house occupied by the maids. On going out to investigate he ran into Xi-feng and asked her what was happening. Xi-feng went indoors tosit down with him and accepted a cup of tea.

'Something important is missing that no one will own up to having taken,' she said. 'It's thought that one of the maids in the Garden might have stolen it, so they are searching everyone in order to clear the innocent ones of suspicion.'

While Xi-feng was explaining this to Bao-yu, Wang Shan-bao's wife was proceeding with her search.

'Whose are these trunks?' she asked, and demanded that the owners should come forward and open them.

Aroma had suspected that some sort of trouble lay ahead when she saw the state that Skybright was in when she returned from her interview. The raid confirmed her premonition. Resignedly she set the other maids an example by opening her own trunks and boxes first. Nothing of interest was found in them. The searchers passed on. Each girl stood by her own things and opened them up as the searchers came to them. Finally only Skybright's trunk remained.

'Which girl's is this?' said Wang Shan-bao's wife. 'Why doesn't she come forward and open it?'

Aroma was on the point of opening it herself when Skybright, who, to judge from the state her hair was in, had only just got out of bed, came rushing into the room, flung the lid open with a bang, picked the trunk up by its bottom, and

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emptied its contents on the floor. Wang Shan-bao's wife blushed **scarlet** with embarrassment.

'There's no cause to be angry with *me*, miss,' she said. 'I'm not carrying this search out to please myself, I'm here on Her Ladyship's orders. If you don't want your things to be searched, you have only to say so and I shall tell Her Ladyship. There's no need to carry on like this about it.'

At this Skybright's wrath blazed up in fury. She pointed at the old woman's face.

‘You say you are here on Her Ladyship’s orders. Well I’m here on Her *Old* Ladyship’s orders. Anyway, I thought I knew all the women who worked at Her Ladyship’s place and I’m sure I never saw a self-important, meddlesome old busybody like you there before!’

Xi-feng, who had now rejoined them, was secretly delighted to see Wang Shan-bao’s wife getting the rough side of Skybright’s tongue, but because the woman was her mother-in-law’s favourite, she had to pretend that she was shocked, and shouted at Skybright to be silent. Wang Shan-bao’s wife looked angry and flustered and seemed on the point of retorting; but Xi-feng restrained her.

‘All right, Mrs Wang, that will do. You don’t have to put yourself on the same level by arguing with the girl. You get on with your searching. We’ve got all the other places to go to yet, and if we delay too long, word will get round that we are coming and they will be prepared for us. If that happens and you don’t succeed in finding anything, *I* shan’t consider myself responsible.’

Though inwardly fuming, Wang Shan-bao’s wife was obliged to contain herself and spent the next minute or two rummaging tight-lipped among Skybright’s possessions. Having found nothing of importance, she then asked Xi-feng if they might go elsewhere.

‘Now have you looked really thoroughly?’ said Xi-feng. ‘You’re going to look pretty silly if you have to report back to Lady Wang tomorrow that you couldn’t find anything.’

‘We’ve been through everything,’ said one of the women. ‘There’s nothing here that there shouldn’t be. We did

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find one or two boy’s things, but they were the sort of things a quite small boy would use. Probably they belonged to Bao-yu when he was little. Anyway, they’re of no consequence.’

‘In that case we can be on our way,’ said Xi-feng, pleasantly. ‘On to the next place, then!’

Off they went without more ado. Xi-feng turned to Wang Shan-bao’s wife as they walked along for a word in her ear.

‘I’ve got a suggestion to make, but I don’t know whether you’ll agree to it or not. Can we confine this search to members of our own household? I don’t think we ought to search the maids in Miss Xue’s room.’

‘Oh, I quite agree,’ said Wang Shan-bao’s wife. ‘It would never do to go searching the rooms of our guests.’

Xi-feng nodded.

‘That’s what *I* thought’

They had by now reached the Naiad’s House. Dai-yu had already gone to bed when the arrival of all these people was announced. Unable to guess what they could have come for, she was on the point of getting up to ask when Xi-feng came into her room and begged her to stay in bed.

‘Go to sleep. We shall be gone again in a moment.’

She slipped out again after a few inconsequences and rejoined the others, who had already begun their searching. In the course of rummaging through the various trunks and boxes in Nightingale’s room they came across some old amulets whose period of effectiveness had long since expired and a set of two pouches and a fan-case designed for wearing on a belt. The fan-case had a fan in it, which they took out to examine. These were obviously masculine articles and had in fact been worn at one time by Bao-yu. Wang Shan-bao’s wife, congratulating herself on what she took to be a significant discovery, called Xi-feng over to witness it.

‘Look at these things, Mrs Lian! Now where would these have come from?’

Xi-feng smiled.

‘These would be old things of Bao-yu’s,’ she said. ‘He and the girls here have been seeing each other for years - since they were little children. Their Ladyships would probably

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remember having seen these things on him. You could always ask them, if you don't believe me.'

Wang Shan-bao's wife was at once all smiles.

'If *you* recognize them, Mrs Lian, that's good enough for me.'

'There's nothing here worth bothering about,' said Xi-feng. 'I think we should leave these folk in peace and hurry on elsewhere.'

'We've had so many other things where these came from and given so many in return that I can't keep track of them,' said Nightingale laughing. 'I couldn't for the life of me tell you *when* he gave us these.'

Xi-feng and Wang Shan-bao's wife now conducted their little party to Tan-chun's place. This time their arrival was anticipated. Someone had brought w9rd of their coming, and Tan-chun, guessing that something serious must have happened to have provoked so ugly a reaction, was standing in the open doorway, surrounded by maids with lighted candles, waiting for the search party when it arrived.

'Well?' she asked, somewhat challengingly. 'What do you want?'

Xi-feng smiled an emollient smile.

'Something has been missing and they have been questioning everyone for several days now without being able to find out who took it. It's thought that whoever is responsible for the theft might try to incriminate one of the maids. We are making this search more for the sake of clearing them than because we really suspect any of them of taking it.'

'Naturally all my maids are thieves,' said Tan-chun affably. 'As a matter of fact, *I* am their principal fence. If you want to search, you'd better look at my cupboards and boxes first, because anything they steal is automatically handed over to me.'

She ordered the maids to open all her boxes. She also made them bring in her dressing-cases, jewel-boxes, bedding-rolls and miscellaneous wrapped-up bundles of clothing and open them all up for Xi-feng to inspect.

Xi-feng laughed uncomfortably.

'I'm only carrying out your mother's orders, coz. There's

no point in getting offended with me.' She turned to the servants. 'Quickly, do these things up again for Miss Tan.'

Scribe and Ebony, assisted by Patience and Felicity, began refastening the boxes and tying the bundles up again.

'I've said that you may search *my* things,' said Tan-chun, 'but if you want to search my maids', I'm afraid that won't be possible. You see, I am a very hard mistress. I always insist on knowing what my maids have got; consequently everything they have - every needle and thread even - is taken care of by me; I don't allow them to keep anything themselves. So if you want to do any searching, you will have to search me. If that doesn't satisfy you, you have only to report to Lady Wang that I was obstructive and I will gladly face whatever the consequences are tomorrow. I must say, I cannot understand this eagerness to meet trouble half-way. The searching will begin soon enough in this household when the day of confiscation arrives. Didn't you hear the news this morning about the Zhens? *They* tempted fate, just as we are now doing, by carrying out a quite unnecessary search of their own servants, and now there is a confiscation order against them and they are being searched themselves. No doubt our time too is coming, slowly but surely. A great household like ours is not destroyed in a day. "The beast with a thousand legs is a long time dying." In order for the destruction to be complete, it has to begin from within.'

She began to cry. Xi-feng darted a look at the women, which Thou Rui's wife interpreted as a signal that they should go.

'Since Miss Tan has said that the girls' things are all here, Mrs Lian, can't we go on to another place now and

leave her in peace?'

Xi-feng responded by rising to her feet and wishing Tanchun good night.

'Are you sure you've looked properly?' said Tan-chun. 'It's no good coming back tomorrow and asking to look again, because I shan't let you.'

'If all the maids' things are in here, there is no need to look,' said Xi-feng, smiling.

'No need to look, when I've gone to the trouble of having everything opened for you?' said Tan-chun coldly. 'I call

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that rather perverse. Tomorrow I suppose you will say that I covered up for my maids and wouldn't *let* you look. I want to be told in plain language that you have searched as much as you want to. If you haven't, you'd better do so now, while you have the chance.'

Xi-feng smiled. She knew from past experience that she had to be more careful with Tan-chun than with any of the other girls.

'I have already searched your maids' things and your things sufficiently.'

'And what about the rest of you?' Tan-chun asked the women.

'We've searched enough,' said Thou Rui's wife and the other women, smiling.

It was now that Wang Shan-bao's wife showed her total lack of judgement - for she was in truth a very stupid woman. She had heard something of Tan-chun's reputation in the past, but refused to believe that an unmarried girl of her years - particularly one who was a concubine's daughter -could be as formidable as Tan-chun was said to be. No doubt, she told herself, it was the inexperience or pusillanimity of her informants that made them think her so. Was not she, Wang Shan-bao's wife, one of Lady Xing's oldest and most trusted servants? Did not even Lady Wang have to show her a certain measure of deference? A mere chit of a girl like Tan-chun was not going to intimidate her. She had, in any case, the distinct impression that it was Xi-feng and not herself that Tan-chun was angry with. At all events, she resolved to show how little she held Tan-chun in esteem by indulging in a little horse-play at her expense. Going up to Tan-chun, she took hold of a corner of her jacket and turned it back, grinning all over her face.

'There!' she said. 'Now I've even searched Miss Tan, and there's nothing on her either!'

Xi-feng was shocked.

'Good gracious, woman! Are you -?'

But before she could finish there was a resounding *smack!*

and a large **red** mark appeared on the old woman's face where Tan-chun had hit her.

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Tan-chun was in a towering rage.

'Who do you think you are? How *dare* you touch me? It seems that the respect that I and the others show you, even though it is only for Her Ladyship's sake and out of consideration for your age, merely encourages you to make mischief for us and abuse your borrowed powers. That, in all conscience, is hard enough to bear. But now, to lay hands on me - that is really too much! If you have reckoned on my being a poor, timid creature like your Miss Ying whom you can bully and impose upon at your pleasure, you have made a very big mistake. You may search my things if you wish and I shall not complain; but I will *not* be made a laughing-stock. Here!' - with one hand she began feverishly undoing her buttons, while with the other she pulled Xi-feng's hand towards her and placed it beneath her jacket 'Search me! I would rather be searched by you than submit to being pawed over by *a* slave!'

Xi-feng and Patience quickly buttoned her up again and straightened out her dress, shouting angrily at

Wang Shanbao's wife as they did so.

'You have been drinking again, Nannie. Why do you do it, if it makes you behave so badly? You'd better get out of here, before worse happens!'

Patience did her best to comfort Tan-chun.

'Dear miss! Please don't distress yourself. She isn't worth your getting upset about!'

Tan-chun gave a humourless laugh.

'I'm not upset. If I'd been upset I should have beaten my brains out before I'd have let her touch me. I shall see Grandmother and Lady Wang about this first thing tomorrow, and after that I shall call on Lady Xing and make whatever amends she likes to ask for.'

Wang Shan-bao's wife had retreated hastily from the room after her discomfiture and was now lurking outside the window complaining bitterly of the outrage to her dignity.

'This is the first time anyone has ever struck me. I shall see Lady Xing tomorrow and ask her to let me go back to my old home. If this is the way I am to be treated, I had rather not go on living!'

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'Do you hear what that woman is saying?' Tan-chun asked her maids. 'Are you waiting for me to go out there and argue with her myself?'

Scribe, needing no second prompting, hurried outside to take up the cudgels for her mistress.

If I were in your shoes, Mrs Wang, I should have the sense to keep my mouth shut. We should all be only too pleased if you really did go back to your own home; but I'm afraid that when it comes to it, you won't be able to tear yourself away. After all, if *yon* go, who will there be left to worm her way into Her Ladyship's confidence and make all our lives a misery by having searches made?'

Xi-feng was greatly amused.

'Good for Scribe! "Like mistress, like maid"!'

'Oh,' said Tan-chun coldly, 'we thieves have ready wits. We are all capable of turning a phrase or two. It's only when it comes to going behind other people's backs and stirring those in authority up against them that we are not quite so clever.'

Patience made some soothing remark to Tan-chun, simultaneously making a grab at Scribe and puffing her back into the room, while Zhou Rui's wife and the other women did their best to be conciliatory. Xi-feng remained until she had seen Tan-chun safely put to bed before leading her party off in the direction of Xi-chun's Spring in Winter room in the Lotus Pavilion, briefly taking in Li Wan's place on the way.

As Li Wan was unwell and had already taken her medicine and settled down for the night by the time they arrived, they went into the maids' room straight away without disturbing her. After searching each of the maids' boxes in turn and finding nothing, they continued on their way to Xi-chun's apartment.

Being younger and more immature than the other cousins, Xi-chun was much more frightened by this visitation and at first seemed to be quite bewildered by it. It took all of Xifeng's efforts to calm her. Unfortunately, while they were searching in Picture's trunk, they came upon a large packet containing thirty or forty silver medallions, a carved jade belt-buckle, a pair of men's boots and a pair of socks. Even Xi-feng turned pale.

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'Where did these come from?' she asked the unhappy maid.

Picture knelt down and tearfully confessed the truth.

'They were given to my brother by Mr Zhen, madam. Since our parents went to live in the South, our

uncle and aunt have been looking after us. They both drink and gamble a lot, and my brother was afraid that if he left anything with them they would sell it and spend the money, so he made a secret arrangement with one of the old nannies to bring things in to me so that I could look after them for him.'

Xi-chun, a naturally timorous child, was terrified by this discovery.

'I knew nothing about this!' she cried. 'It is very wicked of her. If you want to beat her, cousin, please do it outside. I'm not used to hearing such things. I think it would distress me.'

Xi-feng smiled.

'If what you say is true,' she told Picture, 'you can be forgiven for looking after these things. But your brother had no business to choose such a way of getting them in to you. If *these* things could be smuggled in without anyone knowing, then so could anything else. It's the person who brought them in who is the really guilty party. Of course, if what you say is *not* true, you may as well give up hope of living!'

'I wouldn't dare lie to you, madam,' said Picture, weeping. 'You have only to ask Mr and Mrs Zhen. If they say my brother wasn't given these things, I shan't complain if you beat us both to death.'

'I shall certainly ask,' said Xi-feng. 'But even if he *was* given them, you are still to blame. Who said that you could have things brought in to you secretly? I shall let you off this once if you will tell me honestly who brought them in, but you mustn't ever do this again.'

'Don't let her off!' said Xi-chun. 'There are so many maids. If the older ones see her getting away with it, there's no knowing what they will get up to. *You may* want to forgive her, but *I* don't.'

'She seems to me a pretty sensible girl as a rule,' said Xifeng. 'We all make mistakes sometimes. I'm only proposing

that we should let her off this once. If she does anything like this again, we shall punish her for this offence as well. -Come on now, what about this person who brought you the things?' she asked Picture. 'Tell me who it was.'

'Oh, *I* can tell you that,' said Xi-chun. 'It's sure to have been that old Zhang woman from the rear gate. She's always around here, whispering guiltily to the maids and doing little favours for them - in return for which, of course, they give her their protection.'

Xi-feng told one of the women to make a note of this. The silver and the other things she gave to Zhou Rui's wife to take care of until Picture's statement about their provenance could be verified.

This old Mamma Zhang whom Xi-chun had named as the go-between who had brought things in for Picture's brother was a close kinswoman of Wang Shan-bao's wife, being in fact the mother-in-law of one of her children. However, since becoming Lady Xing's chief confidante, Wang Shanbao's wife had had little time for kinsfolk or former colleagues, and her treatment of Mamma Zhang had caused that matron to take umbrage. On two occasions there had been words between them, and for some time now the two of them had not been on speaking terms. The satisfaction of learning that the guilty bearer of these objects was a hated enemy almost compensated Wang Shan-bao's wife for the indignity of being slapped by Tan-chun and taunted by Tan-chun's maid. She endeavoured to impress Xi-feng with the gravity of what they had discovered.

'This smuggling is a very serious business, Mrs Lian. No doubt the things we are looking for got into the Garden by the same way. I think you ought to look into this.'

'I fully intend to do so,' said Xi-feng. 'I don't need you to tell me.'

They took leave of Xi-chun then and made their way to Ying-chun's. Ying-chun was asleep when they arrived and the maids had already gone to bed. They had to knock a long while at the gate

before anyone answered.

'There's no need to disturb your mistress,' Xi-feng said to the girl who admitted them, and made straight for the maids'

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room, followed by the rest of the party. Knowing that Wang Shan-bao's wife was Chess's maternal grandmother, Xi-feng watched her very attentively to see if she would show any favouritism. Wang Shan-bao's wife began on the trunks of the other maids. None of them contained anything of interest. Coming to Chess's trunk last of all, she merely picked up one or two things lying on the top of it before hurriedly pronouncing that there was 'nothing there', and would have shut it up again if Zhou Rui's wife had not intervened to prevent her.

'Now just a minute. Whether there is or not, you've got to go through it properly, the same as you did the rest, out of fairness to the others.'

She stretched her own hand out as she said this and, diving into the trunk, fetched out, successively, a pair of men's padded socks, a pair of men's satin slippers, and a packet containing a little Loving Couple ornament and a letter. All these things she handed over to Xi-feng.

From handling so many bills, invoices and accounts during her years as a household manager, Xi-feng had learned to recognize quite a large number of characters and was able to make out the whole of the crude missive, written on **pink** Double Happiness notepaper, that Thou Rui's wife had just thrust into her hand.

Since your visit last month my parnts have fund out about us but cant do any thing til Miss Yings marrid if you can meet me in the garden send word by mrs Zhang we can talk more frely in the garden than at home PLEASE TRY I have reed the two rosearys I send you this bag it shows you what I dream of!! PLEASE KEEP IT!!! your loving kit cousin PAN YOUAN

Xi-feng could hardly restrain herself from laughing out loud.

Wang Shan-bao's wife knew nothing of the romantic history that lay behind this letter; but she had already had an uncomfortable feeling that all was not well when she saw the men's socks and shoes; and now, as she watched Xi-feng reading the words on the **pink** notepaper and laughing at what she read, she became even more apprehensive.

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'What is it, madam? An account?' she said. 'I suppose you are laughing because there is some mistake in it.'

'It certainly doesn't balance properly,' said Xi-feng, laughing. 'If you are Chess's grandmother, shouldn't her kit-cousin be a Wang?'

Wang Shan-bao's wife found the question a very strange one.

'She has a kit-cousin on her father's side, her father's sister's son. Pan You-an, that boy who ran away - he's her kit-cousin.'

'That makes sense,' said Xi-feng. 'Would you like me to read you the letter?'

She proceeded to do so, to the great astonishment of all present. Wang Shan-bao's wife, who had sought out the wrongdoing of others with such single-minded persistency, was now mortified to discover that the only wrongdoer she had succeeded in unmasking was her own granddaughter.

'Did you hear that, Mrs Wang?' said Thou Rui's wife, who, like the other women, had signalled her astonishment by sticking her tongue out and wagging her head incredulously. 'Couldn't be clearer than that, could it? No talking a way out of that one! So what do we do now?'

Wang Shan-bao's wife heartily wished that it were possible to slip through some crack and disappear into the ground. Xi-feng contemplated her for some moments with enjoyment, her lips puckered up with suppressed laughter.

'One must look on the bright side,' she said to Thou Rui's wife. 'The girl has quietly gone off and

chosen herself a husband. At least her grandmother is saved the bother of choosing one for her!'

Thou Rui's wife laughed, and added some pleasantry of her own. Wang Shan-bao's wife was left with no one but herself on whom to vent her anger, so she slapped her own face and reproached herself.

'Silly old fool! You've lived too long, that's your trouble! Look what you've brought on yourself! Why couldn't you have kept your mouth shut? Now you've got to suffer for your own foolishness.'

The others had not the heart to laugh, but could not help

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feeling pleased, either because she had made them suffer in the past and it was sweet to see her suffer now in her turn, or from a more detached belief that they were witnessing the working-out of divine retribution on one who had richly deserved its visitation.

Xi-feng noticed with surprise that Chess, who all this time had been standing by with bowed head, saying nothing, had no trace of fear or shame in her expression and wondered if she might be planning to make away with herself. As it was obviously too late that night for questioning her, she deputed two of the women to watch over her until morning. She herself went off with the other women, taking the things with her as evidence.

It was her intention to deal with the matter in the morning, after a night's sleep, but during the course of the night she was several times obliged to get out of bed, and each time she did so she found that she was losing blood. By the time next morning came, she was too weak and dizzy to get up. A doctor was called. He took her pulses, wrote a prescription, and left, saying that she would need to rest. His findings, reported to Lady Wang by the old nannies who went to have the prescription made up, plunged that already depressed gentlewoman into yet greater gloom. Thus judgement on Chess's affair was, for the time being, postponed.

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You-shi, as it happened, called in that day to see Xi-feng and sat for a while talking with her. After that she went on to see Li Wan and talked with her. While she was there, a maid arrived to ask if she would mind calling in to see Xi-chun, so she went along to Xi-chun's. As soon as she arrived, Xi-chun launched into a long and detailed account of what had happened the previous night. She also sent someone round to ask Thou Rui's wife for the things that had been found in Picture's trunk. You-shi verified that they had indeed been given by Cousin Then to Picture's brother.

'Stupid creature!' she said, turning to rebuke Picture, who was standing by.

'Why do you call her names?' said Xi-chun. 'It was your

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laxness which made her the way she is. It's too bad. None of the other girls has been let down like this by her maids. How shall I be able to face them after this? I told Cousin Feng last night to take her away, but she wouldn't. .1 am glad that you have come, because now you will be able to. I don't care what you do with her - beat her, kill her, sell her - I just want to be rid of her.'

Picture knelt down and implored her mistress most piteously not to send her away. You-shi and Xi-chun's nurses also did their best to talk Xi-chun out of dismissing her.

'It was only a single lapse on her part,' said You-shi. 'I'm sure she won't do it again. Think of all the years of service she has given you.'

But Xi-chun, in whom the natural waywardness of youth was reinforced by a perverse contrariness that was all her own, remained adamant in the face of both argument and entreaty and insisted that Picture must go.

'And it isn't only Picture that I don't want to see any more,' she told You-shi. 'The same goes for all the rest of you. From now on I propose to stop going round to your place altogether. There has been a lot of talk

about you people of late. If I continue to go round, lam afraid I might get involved in it.

'*Who* has been talking about us?' said You-shi. 'And what, pray, have they found to talk about? I think you might begin by considering who you are - and who *we* are. If you have heard people talking about us, I should have thought it was up to you to ask them what they meant by it.'

'That's rather strange advice coming from you,' said Xi- chun sneeringly. 'A girl like me is supposed to keep well away from scandal, not go running headlong towards it. You know the saying: "A father should help a son and the son his father, but not in slaying or in doing evil." The same principle holds good for you arid me. I can only answer for my own integrity. If you people end up by getting your-selves into a mess, *I* don't want to have anything to do with it.

You-shi was half angered and half amused by her young sister-in-law's rudeness.

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'I can see now why people speak of Miss Xi as young for her age,' she said, addressing the grown-up servants below the kang. "'Young and foolish" I have heard her called. I used not to believe it of her, but finding her now so unreasonable and so lacking in any sense of proportion, I really do begin to despair of her.'

'She *is* still very young,' said the women placatingly. 'You must expect a few knocks in your dealings with her, Mrs Zhen.'

'I may be "young",' said Xi-chun scornfully, 'but there is nothing "young" about what I have just been saying. And since none of you people can even read or write, how can you have the nerve to call me "foolish"?'

'You are the great scholar, of course,' said You-shi sarcastically, 'the Top of the List candidate! Stupid people like us cannot hope to compete with you in understanding.'

'There's certainly not much understanding in what you have just said,' Xi-chun retorted. 'Your assumption that a Top of the List candidate cannot be stupid is a vulgar fallacy typical of the great mass of blind, undiscriminating worldlings. A true sage can be identified by the very first step he takes, not by examination results.'

'Goodness!' said You-shi mockingly. 'A moment ago we had the great scholar; now, it seems, the great preacher has come to enlighten us!'

'I lay no claim to enlightenment,' said Xi-chun, 'though I *can* see that most people are no better than Picture - *and* that they are as little worth bothering about.'

'You are a cold-hearted little monster,' said You-shi.

'If I seem cold, it is because I wish to keep myself uncorrupted,' said Xi-chun. 'Why should I want to get involved with you and allow myself to be dragged down to your level?'

You-shi was highly sensitive to remarks about her family's reputation and had already been embarrassed and upset by Xi-chun's reference to 'people talking'. Because Xi-chun was only a girl, she had done her best not to lose her temper; but this last remark was too much to stomach. Unable to contain herself any longer, she burst out angrily.

'What do you mean, "dragged down to my level"? You

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turn your maid's offence into an occasion for making a completely unwarranted attack upon *me*, and when I bear your ridiculous attacks with patience, it seems merely t6 encourage you to indulge in further insults. Very well, Miss Holy Purity! I shall be careful to keep away from you in future, in case your priceless

reputation is sullied by my presence.'
She swept out angrily, indicating to her maids as she went that they should bring Picture with them.
'It will be much better for all concerned if you *don't* ever come here again,' Xi-chun called out alter her. 'It will save a lot of argument.'
You-shi heard this and grew even angrier; but reflecting that Xi-chun was, however vexing, a young unmarried daughter of the family and therefore not a person with whom she could engage in open wrangling, she swallowed her anger and hurried off without answering, out of the Garden and into the inner part of the mansion.

What she heard there will be related in the chapter which follows.

CHAPTER 75

Midnight revellers are startled
by a sound of evil omen
And Mid-Autumn moon-watchers listen
to quatrains of unequal merit

When You-shi swept angrily out of Xi-chun's apartment, it had been her intention to visit Lady Wang, but one of the old women in her suite whispered in her ear to advise her against going there.
'Some people from the Zhen family have just arrived there, madam, with a lot of things. I think it's something secret they've come about. It probably wouldn't be very convenient for you to go there now.'
'That's funny,' said You-shi. 'I heard your master saying last night that he had read in the *Gazette* that the Zhens had been attainted. It said that there was a search and confiscation order on their estate and that the family were being brought under arrest to the capital for questioning. What can any of them be doing here?'
'You may well ask, madam. It was some of the womenfolk we saw there. They were in a terrible state, very worried and frightened. I expect they are doing something they ought not to be.'
You-shi abandoned her idea of visiting Lady Wang and went back to see Li Wan, with whom she had been talking a little earlier when Xi-chun called her away. Li Wan had been visited in the meantime by her doctor; and as she was feeling much livelier than she had done for some days, she had remained sitting up after her visit. You-shi found her propped up on pillows and with the bedclothes pulled up round her, eager for conversation. Unfortunately You-shi, who had been so affable on her earlier visit, was now in no mood to talk and sat at Li Wan's bedside silent and preoccupied. U Wan wondered if she was feeling hungry.

'Have something to eat,' she said. 'What would you like?' She turned to Candida. 'What nice little snack have we got that we could offer Mrs Zhen?'

'Please don't bother,' said You-shi. 'You're hardly likely to have interesting snacks in the house after being an invalid for so many days. And in any case I'm not hungry.'

'Someone sent me some rather good wheatmeal tea yesterday,' said Li Wan. 'Why don't you try a bowl of that?'

She told Candida to mix some for her with sugar and boiling water. You-shi made no reply and continued to brood. The women and maids who had come with her tried to think of some means of distracting her.

'You haven't done your face yet since this morning, madam,' said one of them. 'Why not take this

opportunity of having a wash?'

You-shi nodded. Li Wan at once sent Candida for her dressing-case and mirror. Candida offered You-shi the use of her own make-up.

'Our mistress doesn't use make-up, Mrs Zhen. If you don't mind using my stuff, you're very welcome to some of this.'

'It's true that *I* haven't got any,' said Li Wan, 'but you ought to have borrowed some from one of the young ladies to lend her. Fancy offering her your own, and in front of everyone else! It's a good job it was Mrs Zhen. Some people would have been most offended.'

'Oh, that's all right,' said You-shi, and began to wash. The maid with the basin bent down to hold it out to her.

'Where are your manners, girl?' said Li Wan reprovingly, whereupon the maid at once went down on her knees.

'Manners!' said You-shi. 'The outward frills of respectability! Those are the things *our* servants are so good at. What they actually get up to doesn't bear much investigating.'

Li Wan realized that she must be referring to the events of the previous night.

'Why do you say that?' she asked smilingly. 'What has *who* got up to that doesn't bear investigating?'

'Need you ask?' said You-shi. 'You've not been so ill that you've lost the use of your faculties!'

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Before Li Wan could reply, Bao-chai's arrival was announced. Li Wan and You-shi both called out to her to come in. You-shi, hurriedly wiping the water from her face, got up to welcome her and made her sit down with her at the side of the bed.

'On your own?' she asked her. 'Where are all the others?'

'I don't know,' said Bao-chai. 'I haven t seen them yet. Mother isn't very well today, and as her two senior maids are also both ill in bed and I don't trust any of the others, I thought I had better go and stay with her for a few days. At first I was going to tell Lady Jia and Aunt Wang, but then I thought that as this is rather a small matter and I shall in any case be coming back again as soon as Mother is better I wouldn't bother them but simply have a word about it with Cousin Wan.'

Li Wan and You-shi exchanged smiles and glances. Presently, when You-shi had finished her toilet, the three of them each had a bowl of wheatmeal tea.

'I must send someone to see how your mother is and find out what she is suffering from,' said Li Wan. 'I can't go in person, unfortunately, because I am ill myself. Don't worry about anything here. I'll send someone to look after your apartment while you are away. Do come back soon, though, or I shall be blamed for your going.'

'Whyever should you be?' said Bao-chai. 'There's nothing unusual about my going. You are not being asked to connive at a gaol-break. And incidentally, I don't see why it should be necessary to send anyone to my apartment. Why not simply invite Cousin Shi to stay with you for a few days? Wouldn't that be simpler?'

'While we are on the subject, where is Cousin Shi?' said You-shi.

'I sent her off just now to look for Cousin Tan,' said Baochai. 'She was to bring Cousin Tan here so that I could explain to her about going to Mother's too.'

By coincidence 'Miss Shi and Miss Tan were at that very moment announced. As soon as they were seated, Bao-chai told Tan-chun about her intention of moving outside for a few days to look after her mother.

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‘Very wise,’ said Tan-chun. ‘But why only stay outside until Aunt is better? Why not move outside altogether?’

‘That’s rather a strange way to talk,’ said You-shi, laughing. ‘It’s as though you wanted to drive our kinswoman out.’

‘Well, why not?’ said Tan-chun bitterly. ‘Better be driven out now by me than by someone else later on. Kinsfolk are lucky. They don’t *have* to stay here. Not like the members of this happy family - all glaring at each other like angry fighting-cocks, wondering which will be the first one to strike!’

You-shi laughed.

‘I think today must be my unlucky day. I seem to have caught all you young ladies in a thoroughly unpleasant mood.’

‘If you don’t like the heat, you should stay away from the fire,’ said Tan-chun. ‘Who’s been upsetting you then?’ She thought for a bit. ‘It’s not likely to have been Cousin Feng. Not *this* time. So who was it?’

You-shi’s vague answer evaded the question. Tan-chun knew that she was afraid to speak openly for fear of causing trouble.

‘Come on!’ she said tauntingly. ‘Don’t act the innocent! It’s not high treason to tell us. No one’s going to chop your head off. Look at me. Last night I slapped Wang Shan-bao’s wife’s face. That’s an offence deserving hard labour at the very least, yet nothing’s happened so far, bar a bit of muttering. I don’t think anyone is going to give me a beating.’

‘Did you really slap her face?’ Bao-chai asked incredulously. Tan-chun treated them all to a lively account of what had happened, after which You-shi, seeing that there was no longer any point in concealment, proceeded to tell them about her recent encounter with Xi-chun.

‘Oh, she’s always like that,’ said Tan-chun. ‘It’s her nature. Xi-chun is so peculiar, nothing the rest of us say or do is ever going to alter her. By the way’ - she returned to the subject that was uppermost in her mind - ‘I made some inquiries first thing this morning to find out why nothing was happening. Apparently it’s because Cousin Feng is ill again. I also sent someone to inquire about Wang Shan-bao’s wife. It seems that she has been given a beating. For interfering.’

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‘Quite right, too!’ said You-shi and Li Wan. But Tan-chun took a more cynical view.

‘It would be a comparatively easy way of disarming suspicion. We must wait and see.’

You-shi and Li Wan looked thoughtful, but neither made any comment.

Shortly after this the maids came in to say that dinner was ready. Xiang-yun and Bao-chai went back to their apartment to pack, in preparation. for their respective moves. Our narrative leaves them at this point.

You-shi and Tan-chun, after taking their leave of Li Wan, made their way to Grandmother Jia’s apartment. The old lady was reclining on her couch listening, while Lady Wang told her about the Zhens: the offences they had been charged with, the confiscation of their property and their coming up to the capital now for questioning. Grandmother Jia was obviously much shaken by what she heard, but brightened up somewhat when You-shi and Tan-chun arrived.

‘Where have you both come from?’ she asked them. ‘I suppose you know that Feng and Wan are both ill now? I wonder how they are today.’

‘They are both a little better,’ said You-shi.

Grandmother Jia nodded and sighed.

‘I think we’ve heard enough about other people’s troubles for the time being. It’s time we started thinking

about the arrangements for our Mid-Autumn party.'

'The catering arrangements have all been made,' said Lady Wang. 'It only remains for you to decide where you want it. I suppose the nights are getting too chilly now for us to have it out in the Garden.'

'We can always put on a bit more clothing,' said Grandmother Jia. 'Of course we must have it in the Garden. That's what the Garden is for.'

While they were speaking, some of the women came in carrying the dinner-table between them. Lady Wang and You-shi laid chopsticks and carried in the rice. When all was ready, Grandmother noticed that in addition to her own dishes there were two large food-boxes containing dishes from.

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the other apartments. It was a long-established custom that the occupants of other apartments should send her samples of what they were planning to eat that day themselves as a way of showing her their respect.

'I've told you all a number of times to stop doing this,' she said. 'Why won't you ever do as I say?'

'These are only very ordinary things here,' said Lady Wang, referring to her own contribution. 'It's one of my fast-days today, so I have only vegetarian dishes. I know you don't much like bean-curd fried in batter, which is one of the things I am having. The only thing of mine I think you might like is a salad pickle of chopped water-mallow in pepper sauce.'

'That sounds rather nice,' said Grandmother Jia. 'I think I'd like to try some of that.'

Faithful quickly took the saucer containing it out of the box and put it down in front of her. Bao-qin, having first apologized to each of her seniors for sitting down in their presence, took her place at one side of the table. Grandmother Jia said that Tan-chun should eat with her as well, whereupon Tan-chun too made her apologies and sat down. She sat at the other side of the table opposite Bao-qin. Scribe quickly fetched her a bowl and chopsticks. Meanwhile Faithful was pointing out the other dishes to Grandmother Jia.

'I can't make out what these two here are. They are from Sir She. The stuff in this bowl is creamed chicken and bamboo. It's from Mr Zhen.'

She brought the bowl of sliced bamboo-shoot over and put it down on the table. Grandmother Jia made a couple of dips into it with her chopsticks. She ordered all the 6ther dishes to be taken back to their senders.

'Tell them thank you very much I've tried some, but not to send things to me any more. If I ever want anything, I shall let them know.'

The women made some reply and went o*ff* with the boxes. 'Now bring me my rice-gruel and I'll have a bit of that,' said Grandmother Jia.

You-shi stepped forward with a bowl of gruel. It was made with **red** 'Emperor' rice, she told her. After drinking

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about half of it, Grandmother Jia ordered the other half to be taken to Xi-feng. She pointed to one of the dishes.

'And this is for Patience.' She turned to You-shi. 'I've finished. Now you can eat.'

'Thank you,' said You-shi, but waited all the same until the old lady had rinsed her mouth and washed her hands and was walking up and down on Lady Wang's arm for her digestion before she 'begged to be seated'. By this time Baoqin and Tan-chun had finished eating. They got up as You-shi sat down, excusing themselves from keeping her company while she ate.

‘Oh,’ said You-shi, ‘I’m not used to eating at a big table like this all on my own.’

‘Faithful and Amber can eat with you for company,’ said Grandmother Jia.

‘Good!’ said You-shi. ‘I was about to suggest that.’

‘I like to see people eating together,’ said Grandmother Jia. She pointed to Butterfly. ‘Now here’s a good girl. Why shouldn’t *she* eat with you as well? Go on, child! Go and eat with your mistress. As long as you are here with me, it doesn’t matter if you break the rules for once.’

‘Come on!’ said You-shi to the maid encouragingly. ‘Don’t pretend to be bashful!’

Grandmother Jia stopped walking up and down and stood with her hands clasped behind her back to watch them eat. It suddenly struck her that the rice being served was the plain white rice normally eaten by the servants and that You-shi, too, was eating it.

‘Why are you giving Mrs Zhen this stuff?’ she asked them. ‘There isn’t any of Your Old Ladyship’s rice left,’ said the maids. ‘You had an extra young lady eating with you today, don’t forget.’

‘Meals are made to measure nowadays,’ said Faithful. ‘We can’t afford to be extravagant the way we used to be.’

‘There have been so many floods and droughts during the past few years,’ said Lady Wang. ‘Our farms haven’t been able to make up their quotas. These special kinds of rice are particularly hard to’ come by. We have had to start rationing them rather carefully.’

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‘Even the cleverest housewife can’t make rice-gruel without rice.’ Grandmother Jia quoted the proverb amidst general laughter.

Faithful turned to address the women waiting outside the door.

‘If Her Old Ladyship’s rice is all finished, you can get the rice that Miss Tan would have eaten if she hadn’t been eating with us and bring it here for Mrs Zhen.’

‘No need,’ said You-shi. ‘What I’ve got here is quite enough for me.’

‘I dare say it is,’ said Faithful, ‘but what about me?’ The women hurried off to fetch the rice. Presently Lady Wang went off to have dinner in her own apartment, leaving You-shi to entertain Grandmother Jia. The time passed quickly, with much good-humoured teasing and laughter, and the first watch had already begun before Grandmother Jia noticed how late it was getting.

‘You’d better be getting back now,’ she told You-shi. You-shi took her leave. Outside the inner gate she got into her waiting carriage. Her women pulled the blind down, then, taking all the maids with them except Butterfly, who was riding in the carriage with her mistress, hurried on ahead so that they could be waiting for You-shi when she arrived in the other mansion. The men from both gates walked some way along the street to keep it clear of pedestrians while six or seven pages pushed and pulled the carriage (it seemed too short a distance and too late an hour for mules) as far as the interior of the Ning-guo gateway. There the pages retired, old w6men came forward and raised the blind, and Butterfly dismounted and helped out her mistress. You-shi noticed that there were four or five large carriages waiting below the stone lions which flanked the gate and commented to Butterfly on their presence.

‘I wonder how many horses there are in the stables? If this number came by carriage, you may be sure that a much greater number will have come on horseback.’

As she and Butterfly entered the outer courtyard, Jia Rong’s wife at the head of a party of maids and older women carrying lanterns advanced to meet them.

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‘I’ve been dying for I don’t know how long to have a look at the men while they are gambling,’ said You-shi, ‘but so far I haven’t had an opportunity. Tonight is the best chance I shall ever get. Let’s go along the wall in front of the windows so that we can peep in at them.’

The women with lanterns made a detour towards the building in which the men were congregated. One of them went ahead and warned the pages waiting outside not to announce their arrival to the men or make any other noise that would warn those inside of their coming. You-shi and her party were thus able to steal right up to the windows and could hear everything that was going on inside. Among the medley of sounds that met their ears, numbers seemed to predominate, some uttered exultantly and with raucous shouts of laughter, others angrily or despairingly and to the accompaniment of curses and profanities.

Cousin Zhen had found the ban on amusements during the seemingly interminable period of mourning for Jia Jing which convention imposed on him extremely irksome. Archery, for some reason, was permitted, and a few months previously he had hit on archery as a means of getting round the ban. A number of young men from the wealthy and aristocratic households of his acquaintance were invited round to the Ning-guo mansion to participate. Shooting was to be competitive.

‘Random shooting is quite useless,’ he explained to them. ‘You not only don’t make any progress; it actually spoils your form. You’ve got to have incentives of some kind to keep you on your toes., and the best way of doing that is to bet on something.’

Butts were set up in the shooting gallery below the Celestial Fragrance Pavilion and every day after lunch the young men came along to compete. Since, as Bereaved Son, it would have been unseemly for Cousin Zhen himself to have been named in this connection, the nominal convenor and Organizer of these gatherings was Jia Rong. All those invited were rich, profligate, dashing young fellows, accustomed to spending their time in cock-fighting, dog-racing and even more questionable amusements. After some discussion it was

decided that the responsibility for providing dinner after the day’s archery should fall to each one of them in turn. It became a point of honour to make these dinners as lavish as possible, so that the daily junketings at Ning-guo House came more and more to resemble the Diet of Lintong in the well-known play of that name, except that whereas Duke Mu’s princely guests competed in the bravery of their cornmanders and the magnificence of their regalia, it was in the skill of their chefs and in masterpieces of culinary art that the members of the Ning-guo archery club strove to outdo each other.

When this had been going on for a couple of weeks or so, Jia Zheng and Jia She got to hear about it. The report that reached them cannot have been a very accurate one, however, for, far from being critical of these goings-on, they spoke of them with approval.

‘Since Rong obviously has no aptitude for book-learning,’ Jia Zheng observed, ‘Cousin Zhen does right to encourage him in the martial arts. The boy does, after all, hold a military commission.

They even made Bao-yu, Jia Huan, Jia Cong and Jia Lan participate. The four of them had to go over every day after lunch and not return until each of them had taken his turn at the butts.

But it was not of course in the archery that Cousin Zhen was interested. On the grounds that resting the muscles was an important part of one’s training, he was soon advocating a little cards or dice in the evenings as a means of relaxation. At first they played only for drinks, but soon they were playing more and more for money; the time spent on gaming gradually encroached on the time devoted to archery; betting became more open; and finally, with the formal opening of a ‘bank’ some three or four months previously, regular, organized gambling for heavy stakes had become a daily routine. The Ning-guo servants, who grew fat on the pickings, were delighted with these new arrangements and, anxious that they

should go on, if possible, for ever, took very good care that no one outside the mansion should get to hear about them.

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Lady Xing's brother, Xing De-quan, himself a keen gambler, had lately become a frequenter of this establishment; so, inevitably, had Xue Pan, who was never so happy as when he was throwing away his money.

Xing De-quan was very unlike his sister. Drinking, gambling and debauchery were his only interests; consequently whenever any money came into his hands, he spent it like water. The singular obtuseness he showed in all his dealings had earned him the nickname of 'Uncle Dumbo'. And since Xue Pan was already known to all and sundry as 'the Oaf King ', the two of them when they were together were referred to by the young men as 'Uncle Dumbo and Cousin Oaf'.

The situation when You-shi peeped inside was as follows. Cousin Oaf and Uncle Dumbo, each with a partner, were playing six-dice Grabs on the kang in the outer room. Simultaneously another dicing game, Driving the Sheep, was being played by several players sitting round a large table on the floor below. The inner room, where a slightly more intellectual group were playing Tin Kau, was devoted to dominoes. The servants were all pages of fifteen or under. There was also a pair of male prostitutes, powdered, over-dressed youths of seventeen or eighteen, whose duty was to ply the guests with drink. It was this pair who first caught You-shi's eye when she looked in.

Xue Pan had been having the sulks earlier on because he was losing, but then his luck had changed: he had not only recouped his losses but made a lot of extra money. He was therefore in a very good mood indeed. Cousin Zhen suggested that this might be a good point at which to stop and have dinner. They could go on playing afterwards if they wanted to.

'What about the two other lots?' he inquired.

It transpired that the Tin Kau players in the next room were in process of settling up after finishing the game and were in fact beginning to think about their dinner, but that the group at the big table playing Driving the Sheep had not yet reached a suitable point at which to break off. Cousin Zhen ordered dinner to be served for all those, himself

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included, who were ready. Jia Rong was to wait and have dinner with the other players when they had finished.

Xue Pan, elated by his success, sat with a cup of wine in one hand and his arm round the shoulders of one of the pretty pot-boys. With a victor's expansive generosity he ordered the other boy to pour some wine 'with his compliments' for Uncle Dumbo. But Uncle Dumbo was thoroughly out of temper at having lost the game, and the two cupfuls he drank now in rapid succession served merely to make him tipsily aggressive. He vented his anger on the two young ganymedes, who, he claimed, had treacherously withdrawn their favours from him and transferred them to the winner.

'Heartless brood of unnatural little whore's gits!' he grumbled. 'You've had plenty of favours off me in the past -and off everyone else here. Now, just because I've lost a few taels, I'm not good enough for you. What makes you so certain you won't ever need my help again in the future?'

The other guests all knew that he was drunk. Those of them who were losers themselves smiled wryly and said nothing, but one or two of the winners magnanimously expressed their sympathy.

'That's right, Uncle. Rotten little bastards! That's just the way they *do* behave.'

‘Why don’t you pour Uncle a drink and tell him you’re sorry?’ said another of them.

The two young ganymedes, practised professionals in every trick of the trade, were on their knees at Uncle Dumbo’s side in a moment, offering him wine, fondling his thigh, and gazing with simpering archness into his eyes.

‘Don’t be angry with us, dear old friend. We are only children. We have to do as we are told. Our teacher always tells us, “It doesn’t matter what they are like or what your own feelings are, the person who at any moment has the most money is the one you must be nice to.” Just win a lot of money later on this evening, old friend, and you’ll see how nice we shall be to you!’

The disarming frankness of this made everyone laugh. Even Uncle Dumbo, though he tried hard not to, was forced to join in.

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‘All right, I forgive you,’ he growled as he took the proffered winecup. ‘Though I don’t mind telling you, if I hadn’t been so fond of you two, I’d have kicked the stuffing Out of your little tum-tums!’

He shot his foot up as he said this, by way of demonstration. The two boys scrambled to their feet in mock alarm. Each of them carried a long woman’s handkerchief of flowered silk. With mincing gestures, still holding their handkerchiefs in their hands, they guided the winecup towards his lips. Uncle Dumbo’s loud gurgles of delight were briefly interrupted while he threw his head back and drained the cup. Then, still laughing, he pinched their cheeks.

‘Little dears!’ he said. ‘How I loves them!’

His mood changed abruptly as he remembered a grievance. He smote the table angrily and glared at Cousin Zhen.

‘I had a quarrel with your Uncle She’s wife yesterday, did you know that?’

‘With Aunt Xing?’ said Cousin Zhen. ‘No, I hadn’t heard that.’

Uncle Dumbo sighed self-pityingly.

‘About damned money, as usual. You don’t know the hist6ry of our Xing family, dear boy. When my old mother died, I was still too young to know what was going on. I have three elder sisters. The eldest is your precious aunt. When your aunt married, she took everything we had with her. Everything. My second sister had to marry without a dowry. She and her husband are paupers. My third sister is still unmarried. She lives on a pittance paid out to her by that old bitch, Wang Shan-bao’s wife, who has charge of all our money. Well, I went along yesterday to ask her for a few coppers. Not Jia money, mind you: our Xing money is good enough for me. But would she give me any? Not she! And that’s the reason why I get treated by you lot like a poor relation.’

Cousin Zhen knew that he was drunk, but as it was embarrassing that these unsavoury details of family history should be paraded in front of outsiders, he did his best to mollify Uncle Dumbo and get him onto another tack.

All this was clearly audible to You-shi outside.

‘Did you hear that?’ she whispered to Butterfly, who was

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standing beside her. ‘That’s Lady.Xing they’re talking about. If her own brother talks about her in that way, you can hardly wonder that other people complain about her.’

She would have said more, but checked herself in order to attend to what was going on inside. The group playing Driving the Sheep had now broken off and were calling for wine.

‘Who was upsetting Uncle Dumbo just now?’ asked one of them. ‘We couldn’t quite catch what it was about. Tell us what happened, Uncle, and we’ll see you get fair play.’

Uncle Dumbo proceeded to tell them how the two boys had forsaken him because he had no money.

‘Good grief!’ said the young man who had asked the question. ‘I don’t blame you for being angry - What do you mean by it?’ he asked the boys. ‘He’s only lost a bit of money, hasn’t he? He hasn’t lost his prick!’

The company roared with laughter. Uncle Dumbo’s mouthful of rice was spattered over half the floor.

‘You dirty bugger!’ he said. ‘Can’t you open your mouth without being crude?’

You-shi gave a little snort of disgust.

‘Just listen to those animals! By the time they’ve swilled a few more cups of wine, heaven knows what filth they’ll be coming out with!’

She moved on her way - having seen and heard quite as much as she wanted to - returned to her apartment, undressed, and went to bed Cousin Zhen did not get to bed until after two. He spent what remained of the night in Lovey’s room.

As soon as he was up next morning, someone came in with a message to say that the melons and mooncakes he had ordered were now ready and it only remained for him to say who they were to be sent to.

‘Ask your mistress to see to it,’ said Cousin Zhen. ‘I have got other business to attend to.’

Lovey took this message to You-shi, who proceeded to go through the list deciding how much should go to whom and making arrangements for the delivery. She had barely finished doing this when Lovey came back again with another message.

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‘The master wants to know if you are going out today, madam. He says we can t keep Mid-Autumn properly on the fifteenth because we are in mourning still, but there would be no harm in having a little family party tonight.’

‘I don’t *want* to go out,’ said You-shi, ‘but with Mrs Zhu and Mrs Lian both ill in bed, I don’t see how I can refuse to go next door and lend a hand.’

‘The master says, if you *have* to go out, will you at any rate try to get back as early as you can?’ said Lovey.

‘Better hurry up with the lunch then,’ said You-shi. ‘The sooner I can get away, the sooner I’ll be back.’

‘The master’s having lunch in the front today, madam. He says please have your lunch here without him.’

‘Who’s he got there?’ said You-shi.

‘Somebody told me it’s two people just arrived from Nan-king,’ said Lovey, ‘but I don’t know who they are.’

Jia Rong’s wife came in while Lovey was talking. Shortly after that lunch was served. After lunch, You-shi changed into her going-out clothes and went over to Rong-guo House. She did not return until evening.

While she was away, Cousin Zhen went ahead with arrangements for an intimate family party. He. had a whole pig boiled, a whole sheep roasted, and an infinite number of vegetable dishes and entremets prepared. When You-shi got back that evening, he conducted her and the little concubines and Jia Rong and Jia Rong’s wife to the Bosky Verdure Pavilion where it was all laid out. This was in the All-Scents Garden, as they continued to call the little remnant still left them after the main part was. incorporated in Prospect Garden.

They had dinner first. The wine was brought in after they had finished eating, so that they could apply

themselves single-mindedly to games and mirth and the enjoyment of the Mid-Autumn moon, which now (for by this time it was already the beginning of the first watch) shone brightly in a clear, fresh sky, filling the world above and below with its silver light. Cousin Zhen invited the four little concubines to sit at the same table as him and You-shi and join with them in games of Plumstones and Guess-fingers. Presently – for

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the drink was beginning to make him sentimental - he called to them for some music, and Flower sang for them in a clear, sweet voice, accompanied by Lovey on the vertical bamboo flute. Everyone was deeply moved by the performance. After it was over the games continued.

The hours slipped by. Soon it was nearly midnight. Cousin Zhen was by now more than a little drunk. They had all just put on some extra clothes and had some hot tea; the wine-cups had been cleared and clean ones put in their place and a fresh lot of newly heated wine was just being poured, when suddenly a long-drawn-out sigh was heard from the foot of one of the garden walls. It was heard by all of them, quite clearly and unmistakably, and they could feel the hair on their scalps rise as they listened to it.

'Who's there?' Cousin Zhen shouted in a voice that he tried to make fierce and challenging. But though he repeated the question several times, there was no reply.

'It's probably one of the servants,' said You-shi.

'Nonsense!' snapped Cousin Zhen. 'There are no servants living behind any of these walls. In any case, that's the Hall of the Ancestors over there. What would anyone be doing behind *that* wall?'

A rustle of wind passed, at that very moment, along the foot of it and a distant sound like the opening and closing of a door could be heard from inside the ancestral temple. An oppressive feeling of dread came over them; the night air seemed suddenly to have grown colder; the moon appeared less bright than it had been a few minutes before; and they could feel their skins crawling with terror.

Shock had made Cousin Zhen almost sober; but though he managed to keep better control of himself than the others, he was very much shaken and had lost all appetite for enjoyment. Nevertheless he forced himself and the others to sit a little longer before retiring finally to bed.

He rose quite early next morning. It was the fifteenth, one of the two days in each month on which offerings have to be made to the ancestors. Entering the ancestral temple with the other male members of the family, he took the opportunity of looking round inside it very carefully; but everything

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was as it should be; there was no sign whatever of anything untoward having happened. He put down the previous night's terror to the effects of drunkenness - a mild attack of the horrors - and resolved to make no further mention of it. When the service was over, he shut the temple up again and made sure that the doors were securely locked and barred.

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After dinner that evening Cousin Zhen went over with You-shi to Rong-guo House. He found Jia She and Jia Zheng in Grandmother Jia's room. The two of them were sitting on the kang, talking and laughing with the old lady, while Jia Lian, Bao-yu, Jian Huan and Jia Lan stood on the floor below. After greeting them and exchanging a word or two with each of them in turn, he sat, or rather half-sat, in polite discomfort, on a stool next to the door. Grandmother Jia vouchsafed a gracious smile in his direction.

‘How is your Cousin Bao’s archery these days?’

Cousin Zhen jumped to his feet to reply.

‘Greatly improved, Lady Jia. It isn’t only his form that is better; he is beginning to handle the bow with much greater strength.’

‘That’s the point at which to stop then,’ said Grandmother Jia. ‘We don’t want him straining himself.’

‘No, no, certainly not,’ said Cousin Zhen. ‘I quite agree.’

‘Those mooncakes you sent yesterday were very good,’ said Grandmother Jia. ‘The melons *looked* all right, but there’s not much inside them when you cut them open.’

‘Those mooncakes *are* good, aren’t they?’ said Cousin Zhen. ‘They were made by our new pastry-cook. I tried them myself to make sure they were all right before venturing to send you any. As for the melons: we’ve been lucky in previous years, but for some reason none of them this year seem to be any good.’

‘I think we must blame the weather,’ said Jia Zheng. ‘The rains this year were excessive.

‘The moon must be up by now,’ said Grandmother Jia. ‘Let’s go and make our Mid-Autumn offering.’

She got up and, leaning on Bao-yu’s shoulder, led the way

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into the Garden. The main gate was wide open and hung with great horn lanterns. When they reached Prospect Hall, they found servants with lighted lamps waiting for them on the terrace and a table on which incense smoked in a square container and on which offerings of melons and other fruit and mooncakes had been set out on dishes. Lady Xing and all the other female members of the family were waiting inside the hall.

Moonlight and lanterns gleaming pale

Through a thin aromatic veil –

It was indeed a scene of indescribable beauty. A carpet for kneeling on had been laid on the terrace at the foot of the table on the side nearest the hall. Grandmother Jia washed her hands, lit some sticks of incense, knelt down on the carpet, bowed down, and offered up the incense. The others followed her example.

‘The best place for enjoying the moon from is the top of a hill,’ she told them when they had finished. She suggested the pavilion on the summit of the ‘master mountain’ behind Reunion Palace (of which Prospect Hall was a part) as the place to have their party. The servants at once went off to make it ready. Meanwhile Grandmother Jia sat talking with the others inside Prospect Hall, resting and drinking tea. Presently the servants came back to report that the mountain-top pavilion was now ready. The old lady stood up again and, supported on either side by her maids, prepared to make the ascent.

‘I’m afraid the moss on the steps might make them rather slippery,’ said Lady Wang. ‘Wouldn’t it be better if you went up in a chair?’

‘The servants sweep them every day,’ said Grandmother Jia. ‘How can there be any moss? They are good, level steps and not too steep. The exercise will be good for me.’

Jia She and Jia Zheng led the way, followed by a couple of old women with horn lanterns. Faithful, Amber and You-shi supported the old lady on either side, and Lady Xing, Lady Wang and all the others followed in a dose procession behind.

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It was only a hundred or so steps up the zig-zag path to the summit.

The pavilion was a rectangular building with one completely open side looking onto a terrace. Because it was situated on the convex grassy summit of the little 'mountain', it was called Convex Pavilion. Two tables with chairs round them had been set out on the terrace, separated from each other by a large screen. The tables and chairs, like the moon and melons and mooncakes, were all round, in honour of the occasion. Grandmother Jia sat at the head of one of the tables with Jia She, Cousin Zhen, Jia Lian and Jia Rong on her left hand and Jia Zheng, Bao-yu, Jia Huan and Jia Lan on her right. Between them they filled only about half the places round the table.

'I never felt in the past on these occasions that we were a small family,' Grandmother Jia commented. 'Looking at us today, though, I must say we do make a very miserable turnout. I can remember Mid-Autumns when there were thirty or forty of us sitting down together. Ah, what times we had then! We shan't ever have numbers like that again. Let's have the girls to sit with us. See if we can't fill up that gap!'

Someone went over to the table presided over by Lady Xing on the other side of the screen to fetch Ying-chun, Tanchun and Xi-chun. Jia Lian, Jia Rong, Bao-yu and the other boys got up while the chairs were rearranged and the girls were installed at the table. Then they reseated themselves in their proper order, Jia Lian and Jia Rong with Ying-chun and Xi-chun between them, and Bao-yu and Jia Huan on either side of Tan-chum.

Grandmother Jia asked someone to fetch a spray of cassia and made one of the women sit behind the screen and drum for them, so that they could play Passing the Branch. Anyone whose hand the branch was in when the drumming stopped had first to drink a cup of wine and then tell a funny story. The drumming started and the branch passed from Grandmother Jia to Jia She and so on round the table. It stopped just as the branch had reached Jia Zheng's hand on its second time round. He raised the winecup to his lips to the accompaniment of much secret nudging and pinching among the

younger folk, to whom the notion of Jia Zheng telling a joke was in itself unbelievably funny.

Jia Zheng could see how much the old lady was enjoying herself and was anxious not to spoil her pleasure. Before he could begin his story, however, she saw fit to give him notice that he must expect to be punished if he did not make her laugh.

'I can only think of one joke,' said Jia Zheng. 'If you don't find it amusing, you will just have to punish me.'

'Very well, tell us your one joke then,' said Grandmother Jia.

'It is about a hen-pecked husband,' said Jia Zheng.

He got no further. Already his audience were convulsed. It was not that what he had said was the least bit funny, simply that they had never heard him talking about such things before.

'This is sure to be good,' said Grandmother Jia.

'In that case,' said Jia Zheng, laughing himself, 'let me persuade you to drink a cup of wine.'

'Very well,' said Grandmother Jia.

At once Jia She and Jia Zheng rose to their feet. Jia She held a winecup in both his hands while Jia Zheng poured wine into it from a wine-kettle. Then Jia Zheng took the cup from Jia She and ceremoniously set it down in front of Grandmother Jia. The two men stood in stiffly deferential attitudes beside her while she drank some, then, having completed their little pantomime, resumed their places.

Jia Zheng proceeded with his story.

'This hen-pecked husband was so afraid of his wife that he never dared stay long away from the house. But one Mid-Autumn Festival he chanced to be out shopping in the street when a friend caught sight of him and insisted on dragging him off to his house for a drink. Without meaning to, the husband became very

drunk - so much so that he had to stay at his friend's house for the night. When he woke up the next morning, he was full of remorse. However, there was nothing for it but to hurry back home and apologize. When he got back, his wife was washing her feet.

"'Very well," she said when he had finished apologizing, "if you will lick my feet clean, I will forgive you."

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'The man began to lick, but a feeling of nausea overcame him and. he showed signs of wanting to be sick. When his wife saw this, she was furious.

"'How dare you?" she screamed, and looked as if she was about to give him a beating.

'The husband knelt down in terror and begged to be forgiven.

"'Please, my dear! It isn't that I find your feet in the least distasteful. It's just that I drank rather a lot of **yellow** wine last night and ate lots of very rich mooncakes, so today I am feeling a little *queasy*."'

Grandmother Jia and the rest all laughed and Jia Zheng poured Grandmother Jia another cup of wine.

'Someone had better change this **yellow** wine for samshoo,' she said. 'We don't want you husbands having this sort of trouble with your wives tomorrow!'

This produced another laugh.

The drumming recommenced and the branch, starting from Jia Theng, began circulating again. This time it stopped with Bao-yu. Bao-yu had been feeling uncomfortable to start with because of Jia Zheng's presence, but became ten times more so when he found himself stuck with the branch.

'If I tell a joke and it's no good,' he thought, 'he will say I've no invention. But if I tell a good one, he'll say I have no aptitude for serious things, only frivolous ones, and that will be even worse. I'd much better not tell one at all.'

Having reached this decision, he stood up and asked his father to excuse him.

'I'm sorry,' he said, 'I can't tell jokes. May I do something else, please?'

'You may compose a poem on the theme of "Mid-Autumn Moon",' said Jia Zheng. 'If it is good, I shall reward you; if it is not - I shall deal with you tomorrow.'

'This is a game we are playing,' said Grandmother Jia testily. 'Do you *have* to make the boy write poetry?'

'He can do it if he wants to,' said Jia Zheng. He was smiling.

'Very well, let him do it then,' said Grandmother Jia. 'Fetch him a brush and. paper somebody.'

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'No padding, now!' Jia Zheng told Bao-yu. 'No "crystal", "ice", "jade", "silver", "light", "bright", "white" - anything of that sort. I want something original that will give me some idea of what you have been doing with your mind during this past year or two.'

Bao-yu found these injunctions by no means uncongenial, and having succeeded, in quite a short time, in thinking of a quatrain, he wrote it out and handed it to his father. Jia Zheng said nothing, but was observed to nod after he had finished reading it' which Grandmother Jia interpreted to mean that he could not have found the poem too bad.

'Well?' she asked him.

Jia Zheng wanted to make her happy.

'Not at all bad,' he said. 'It's a pity he won't study, but his verses are really quite elegant.'

'Well, that's all right then,' said Grandmother Jia. 'You ought to encourage the boy, so that next time he

tries even harder.'

'You are quite right,' said Jia Zheng. He turned to one of the old women in attendance. 'Tell my boys to get out two of the fans I brought back with me from the South, will you, and give them to Bao-yu for me.'

Bao-yu came forward and kotowed. After he had gone back to his seat, the game continued. This time the branch stopped in Jia She's hand. He drank his wine and then told the following story.

'This one is about a dutiful son whose mother was ill. He tried everywhere to get a doctor for her, but couldn't find one, so in the end he was reduced to calling in an old woman who practised acupuncture. Now this old dame knew nothing of physiology, nevertheless she assured the son that it was inflammation of the heart that his mother was suffering from and that she could cure it instantly with her needle. The son became very alarmed.

"'If metal in any form comes into contact with the heart," he said, "it means death. Surely you're not going to put a needle in her heart?"

"'No, no, I shan't put it in the heart," said the old woman. "I mean to put it in here, over the ribs."

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"'But that's too *far* from the heart," said the son. "Surely if you put it in there, it won't do any good?"

"'Oh yes it will," said the old woman. "A mother's heart always inclines towards one side."'

The others all laughed, and Grandmother Jia was persuaded to drink another half cup of wine. After a long pause she said somewhat wryly,

'Perhaps I could do with a bit of the old dame's acupuncture myself.'

Jia She realized, too late, that his somewhat tactless choice of story could be interpreted as a criticism of his own mother. Hurriedly rising to his feet, he held up his cup to toast her with and did what he could to change the subject. Fortunately the old lady made no further reference to his gaffe and the game soon continued. This time the branch stopped with Jia Huan.

Jia Huan had lately been making modest progress in his studies. He was even beginning to show a certain interest in verse, though his tastes in it were decidedly peculiar. When Bao-yu's poem was praised earlier on, he had been dying to demonstrate his own talent, but had not dared risk the charge of showing off in his father's presence. Now that the luck of the game had given him free licence, he called for paper and writing-brush and, in a matter of moments, wrote out a quatrain which he handed to his father. Jia Zheng was not impressed. It was a somewhat weird little poem, and whatever advances Jia Huan might lately have made in his schoolwork, they certainly did not reveal themselves in his choice of words.

'It is easy to see that you and Bao-yu are brothers,' said Jia Zheng. 'Whether in your ideas or the language you express them in, you show the same distaste for sound classical models. The "Two Incomparables" we should call you, not because you are incomparable in virtue like Chen Yuan-fang and his brother, but because you are incomparably hard to knock any sense into: though whereas Bao-yu seems to think that he has inherited the mantle of the Airy Fairy school and fancies himself as a second Wen Ting-yun, you apparently prefer the Spooks and Spectres style of poetry and see yourself as a latter-day Cao Tang.'

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This (not because anyone understood it, but because it *sounded* funny) provoked general laughter.

'Let me see that poem,' said Jia She. He took it from Jia Zheng and almost immediately began praising it.

'I like this poem, it's got guts in it. Boys from families like ours don't need to read themselves half

blind in order to get started on a career. Provided they've read enough to show that they are better educated than the rabble and are capable of holding down a job, they can hardly fail to get on. Why waste a lot of time and energy on turning the boy into a book-worm? What I like about this poem is that it is just the sort of good amateur, not-too-brainy poem you'd *expect* a young chap of our class to write.'

He sent someone to fetch various objects of his to give to Jia Huan as a reward and smilingly patted him on the head.

'You go on writing poems like this, young fellow! We'll have no trouble getting you a posting when the time comes, don't you worry!'

Jia Zheng protested.

'Whatever you think of the poem, it hardly justifies talking in this way about the boy's future.'

Meanwhile the servants had begun pouring more wine so that the game could continue; but Grandmother Jia intervened.

'Why don't you two go now? I'm sure your gentlemen must be waiting for you, and it would be discourteous to neglect them. Besides, it must be all often o'clock and if you go now it will give the children a chance to enjoy themselves unconstrainedly for a while before they go to bed.'

The two brothers at once got up to go, and after a parting cup offered to them on behalf of all the rest, they went off, taking Cousin Zhen and Jia Lian with them, but leaving Baoyu and the two younger boys with the womenfolk.

What happened after their departure will be related in the following chapter.

CHAPTER 76

Flute-playing at Convex Pavilion provokes
too much melancholy
And linked verses at Concave Pavilion betray
a morbid sensitivity

After Jia She and Jia Zheng had left, taking the two younger men with them, Grandmother Jia had the screen removed and proposed that those sitting at both tables should combine to make a single party. The serving-women cleared and wiped the table, replenished and replaced the plates of foodstuff, and set out clean winecups and chopsticks. While they were doing this, Grandmother Jia and the other members of the family were putting on more clothing, washing their hands; rinsing their mouths out, and drinking tea. When all was ready they arranged themselves round the one table. As they did so, Grandmother Jia noticed, for the first time that evening, that Bao-chai and Bao-qin were not there. With Li Wan and Xi-feng also away ill, the family gathering seemed sadly depleted. She commented on this fact to Lady Wang.

'In past years, when Sir Zheng was away, we invited your sister to enjoy the Mid-Autumn moon with us. To be sure, we had some very happy times with her, but the recollection that one of our dear ones was missing - in my case a son, in yours a husband, in the children's a father somewhat dampened our enjoyment. This year, now that he is back, I was looking forward to a really jolly family party; but now, unfortunately, it's your sister and her children who can't be with us. Well, I suppose as she's got two more members of her family with her this year we could hardly expect her to leave them behind and come over here simply to keep me amused. But what a pity that Feng should have chosen this time to be ill! She is always such a tonic as good as ten other people at a party! It only goes to show. One can't have everything.'

She sighed.

'Fetch me a bigger cup,' she said presently, 'and pour me some good hot wine.'

Lady Wang smiled.

'You have both your sons with you this year, Mother. Surely that is a gain? There may have been more females present in previous years, but surely having all your own children about you is better?'

‘Yes, yes, of course it is,’ said Grandmother Jia. ‘I am happy. That is why I have asked for a larger cup. You must all have larger cups too.,
It was getting very late now and the other ladles had no real inclination for carousing; but as Grandmother Jia showed no signs of flagging, they were obliged to keep her company. The effect of forcing themselves to drink with her was that they became unbearably sleepy.
Grandmother Jia called for a carpet to be spread out at the top of the terrace steps. The remaining mooncakes, melons and other eatables were carried over there and the maids and womenservants invited to sit round in a big circle, eating them and enjoying the moon.
Grandmother Jia, too, looked up at the moon. It had now reached its meridian and was even clearer and more beautiful than it had been earlier in the evening.
‘To get full enjoyment of so fine a moon,’ she said, ‘the music of a flute is indispensable.’
She had the girls of the family’s little ten-piece orchestra summoned; but when they arrived, they were informed that not all of them would be required to play.
‘Too much sound would spoil the effect,’ she said. ‘The flute on its own will be enough. And we should like to hear it from quite a long way away.’
The flautist went off obediently to do her bidding. A moment after she had left, one of Lady Xing’s women came hurrying up and whispered something in Lady Xing’s ear.
‘What is it?’ said Grandmother Jia.
‘It’s Sir She,’ said Lady Xing. ‘On his way back just now he tripped over a rock and twisted his ankle.’
Grandmother Jia at once sent two of her own women to

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see how he was and told Lady Xing that she was to go back immediately and look after him. Lady Xing rose and took her leave.
‘Zhen’s wife may as well go back now too,’ said Grandmother Jia. ‘Then I shall go home to bed.’
‘I don’t intend to go back at all tonight,’ said You-shi. ‘I have resolved to spend the night here with you.’
‘That will never do!’ said Grandmother Jia, laughing. ‘Tonight of all nights a young couple like you ought to be together. I can’t have you staying away from your husband for my sake!’
You-shi coloured.
‘Really, Grandma, what a thing to say! I suppose Zhen and I are still *comparatively* young, but we have been married nearly twenty years, you know: we are both nearly forty. And in any case, we’re still in mourning for Sir Jing. I’d much better spend the night here with you.’
‘Yes, of course,’ said Grandmother Jia. ‘I’d quite forgotten you were still in mourning. Poor Sir Jing! It must be more than two years now - but I ought not to have forgotten. I shall drink this big cupful as a punishment! All right, you’d better stay and keep me company then. Let Rong’s wife see Lady Xing out. After that, she can go back home herself.’
You-shi instructed her daughter-in-law accordingly, whereupon little Hu-shi accompanied Lady Xing as far as the main gate of the mansion. There both ladies got into their carriages and went their separate ways.
Meanwhile the company had been over to the other side of the terrace to admire the cassia. They now took their places at table once more and were served with freshly heated wine.
In the midst of their chattering and laughter, suddenly startling them into silence, the undulant, lamenting sound of a flute came floating up to them from the cassia-trees below. Beautiful at any time, such music heard in the stillness of the night under the great vault of the sky with a bright moon above and only the cold, invisible night wind stirring in the earth below steals like a balm over the soul, soothing and dissolving all earthly griefs and cares. They listened, rapt and silent, with upturned, attentive faces. The music continued

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for about the space in which one could comfortably have drunk two cups of tea and then stopped. The momentary silence which followed it was broken by cries of admiration from all present. The winecups were replenished with warm wine.
‘You see,’ said Grandmother Jia. ‘It is good, isn’t it?’
‘It truly is,’ they agreed. ‘Who could have imagined anything so beautiful? If it weren’t for you, Grandma, we might never have had this experience.’
‘It could have been much better,’ said Grandmother Jia. ‘To get the full benefit you need to hear something really slow.’
She had a large cup of wine poured and ordered one of her women to take it to the flautist.
‘Tell her to take her time with this, and say that when she’s finished drinking it, I’d like her to play us another piece, only more softly this time.’
While this woman went off with the message and the wine, the two women she had sent off earlier to inquire after Jia She’s ankle returned.
‘We’ve had a look at Sir She, Your Ladyship. His right ankle is rather swollen, but he’s taken some medicine and the pain is not so bad now. It doesn’t look very serious.

Grandmother Jia nodded and sighed.
'You see? The truth is, I worry too much. *He* was trying to make out that I don't care about him at all!'
While she was saying this, Faithful appeared carrying a large cape and hood.
'Here, put these on,' she said. 'It's getting very late. You don't want to be outside when the dew falls. Aren't you afraid of catching cold? I think when you've sat a little longer, you ought to come back home to bed.'
'Just when I'm enjoying myself you have to start nagging me to go to bed,' said Grandmother Jia. 'I hope you don't think I'm drunk. I've decided to stay up till dawn.'
She called rebelliously for more wine, but did put the cape and hood on notwithstanding. The other ladies drank with her for company and did their best to be amusing. Then, silencing them once more, the sound of the flute concealed in the cassia-bushes below came stealing into their ears, this time

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more plaintive even than before. Indeed, this time the combination of the flute's melancholy with the effects of nocturnal stillness and ghostly moonlight induced a feeling of such overpowering sadness in the listeners that they turned their backs on it and sought, with talk and somewhat forced laughter, to escape it. Fresh wine was called for and the flautist told to stop playing.
'I'll cheer you up, Lady Jia,' said You-shi. 'Let me tell you a funny story. I learnt it specially for the occasion.'
'Ha, ha, ha. Yes, that would be very nice, a joke. Do tell me,' said Grandmother Jia with a jollity that seemed somewhat strained.
'There were once four brothers,' You-shi began. 'The eldest had only one eye, the second had only one ear, the third had only one nostril, and the fourth, though he had all his parts in order, was dumb.'
She had got no farther with her story when she became aware that the old lady's head was nodding down upon her bosom and her eyelids drooping as though she was about to go to sleep. She broke off at once, and she and Lady Wang both called gently to her to wake up. Grandmother Jia opened her eyes wide and laughed.
'I'm not sleeping, I was just resting my eyes. Go on with your story. I'm listening.'
'It's very late,' said Lady Wang. 'The air is cold tonight and there is a lot of dew. Won't you go home and rest now, Mother? We can have another moon-party tomorrow night, if you feel like it. The moon on the sixteenth is still well worth watching.'
'What time is it?' Grandmother Jia asked.
'Past two o'clock,' said Lady Wang. 'The children couldn't hold out any longer. They have all gone off to bed.'
Grandmother Jia looked round the table. Only Tan-chun was still sitting there in the semicircle of empty chairs.
'Well,' said Grandmother Jia, 'they are not used to staying up late. Considering the amount of weakness and sickliness there is among them, I suppose it is just as well. But there's my little Tan, sitting there all on her own, poor child! You go to bed too, my dear. We'll end the party now.'

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She got up herself as she said this, and after taking a sip or two of **green** tea, climbed into her bamboo carrying-chair and was borne out of the Garden by two women, the rest walking beside her or following close behind. But of her and them no more.
One of the women who remained behind to clear the table and stack the crockery noticed that a single porcelain cup was missing. After looking everywhere for it unsuccessfully, she appealed to the other servants.
'I suppose one of you must have dropped it accidentally and thrown it away somewhere. Do please tell us, and let us have the broken pieces, so that when we report the loss we shan't be accused of having stolen it.'
'None of us has broken it,' said the others. 'It might have been a maid of one of the young ladles that broke it. If you can think who it might have been, I should go and ask *them.*'
'You are right,' said the woman, suddenly recollecting. 'I remember Kingfisher coming to fetch a cup for her mistress. I must go and ask her for it.'
She had not far to look. A short way along the paved path at the bottom of the steps she came upon her and Nightingale walking along together. It was Kingfisher who spoke first.
'Oh, has Her Old Ladyship ended the party then? I suppose you don't know where my mistress has gone?'
'I've come to ask you what you've done with one of our teacups,' said the woman, 'and you ask me about your mistress!'
Kingfisher laughed.
'I poured out a cup of tea some time ago and handed it to her, and the next thing I knew was she'd disappeared - with the teacup.'
'Her Ladyship said just now that the young ladies had all gone to bed,' said the woman. 'I don't know where you two can have been larking about all this time not to know anything about it.'

‘I’m sure our mistresses wouldn’t have slipped off to bed without telling us,’ said Kingfisher. ‘More likely they lust went off for a walk. Perhaps when Her Old Ladyship left they joined the others to see her back to her apartment. We’ll go

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over there now and have a look. If they are there, we shall know where your cup is. Why don’t you come round and ask me for it tomorrow? There’s no pressing hurry for it now, is there?’
‘There’s no hurry as long as I know where it is,’ said the woman. ‘I’ll call round and ask you for it tomorrow.’
She went back to the pavilion then, to finish stacking the crockery.

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Lady Wang was wrong. Dai-yu and Xiang-yun had not gone to bed. The sight of all those Jias enjoying the moonlight (in spite of Grandmother Jia’s complaint that the numbers were so few) and the thought of Bao-chai and Bao-qin enjoying a moon-party of their own with Aunt Xue and the two Xue males made the occasion a painful one for Dai-yu. She had slipped away not in order to go to bed but to lean on the terrace railings and cry. Bao-yu on this occasion had little thought for anything but Skybright’s illness, which had lately taken a serious turn for the worse, and after several appeals from his mother to go to bed, he had availed himself of the excuse for going back in order to find out how she was. Tanchun was still feeling too much out of temper after the recent d9mestic upheavals to have any appetite for amusement. Ying-chun and Xi-chun might have kept Dai-yu company, but since they did not as a rule get on with her very well, it would not have occurred to them to do so. That left only Xiang-yun to offer her some comfort.
‘Now coz, this won’t do! You’re an intelligent girl: you must take more care of yourself. I must say, it is too bad of Chai and Qin. All that talk about spending Mid-Autumn night enjoying the moon together and using the occasion to revive the Poetry Club with another linked couplets session - and then, when the time comes, they leave us in the lurch and go off to enjoy the moon by themselves! No Poetry Club, no linked couplets, nothing! It’s all the fault of those wretched men! You remember the remark made by the first Song emperor: “No one but me is allowed to snore in this bedroom!” That’s the menfolk’s attitude at a party. Never mind.

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Since the others haven’t come, we’ll make up some linked couplets ourselves and take them along tomorrow to shame them with.’
Xiang-yun was so enthusiastic a comforter that Dai-yu felt she could not show herself wholly unresponsive.
‘The trouble is, all these people here are making so much noise,’ she said. ‘It’s not an atmosphere very conducive to poetic inspiration.’
‘Although the hilltop is a good place for enjoying the moon from,’ said Xiang-yun, ‘the moon would look even better over water. I don’t know whether you realize it, but one side of this hill does actually give onto the lake. There is a little building there called the Concave Pavilion nestling in a hollow quite close to the water’s edge. Whoever made this Garden must have been quite an educated person. The place where we are now is obviously called the Convex Pavilion because it is on top of the convex hill, and Concave Pavilion must have been given its name because it is in a hollow. Those two words “concave” and “convex” are very seldom encountered in literature. Their use in landscape gardening for the naming of features must be even rarer. To my mind the linking together of these two pavilions by so unusual a pair of names suggests that they must have been specially designed for viewing the moon from: Convex Pavilion for those who like the small, remote moon of the mountains and high places, Concave Pavilion for those who prefer the silky whiteness of the great orb reflected in the surface of the water. “Convex” and “concave” are often thought of as vulgar, unpoetical words, but that is only because of their modern associations. Some people even call that well-known line of Lu You’s vulgar:

In well-worn concave patch the ground ink settles;

but *I* find that criticism rather silly.’
‘Lu You is by no means the only writer to have used those words in a work of literature,’ said Dai-yu. ‘Jiang Yan uses them in his prose-poem “Moss”, Dong-fang Shuo uses them somewhere in his *Book of Marvels*, and in *Lives of the Painters* they turn up in a description of Zhang Seng-yao’s decoration of the Ekayana Monastery at Nanking. In fact, there must be

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countless instances in literature. I think it’s merely ignorance that nowadays leads people to dismiss them

as “unpoetical”. To tell you the truth, it was I who gave these two pavilions their names. That year when Bao-yu did all the naming of places in the Garden there were several places left over afterwards which he either hadn’t got round to naming or had given names to that were thought unsuitable, and the task of naming them was given to us girls. The names we made up were taken to the Palace for Cousin Yuan’s approval and she sent word back saying that provided Uncle Zheng approved of them they were to be used. So that’s how I came to name these two pavilions. All right, let’s go down then.’

The two girls descended the slope of the little mountain. A few steps round a turn in the pathway which skirted the foot of it took them to the pavilion. Near the water’s edge, linking it with Lotus Pavilion farther along the shore, was a bamboo railing. The two old women who were on night watch in it, little imagining that an overspill from the hilltop party would come their way, had long since put their light out and gone to sleep. Dai-yu and Xiang-yun laughed when they saw that the pavilion was in darkness.

‘They’ve gone to sleep. Never mind. All the better. Let’s sit outside here on the covered verandah and look at the moonlight on the water.’

They found a couple of drum-shaped bamboo stools to sit down on. A great white moon in the water reflected the great white moon above, competing with it in brightness. The girls felt like mermaids sitting in a shining crystal palace beneath the sea. A little wind that brushed over the surface of the water making tiny ripples seemed to cleanse their souls and fill them with buoyant lightness.

‘If only I were in a boat now, with some wine to drink!’ said Xiang-yun. ‘If this were my own home, I should jump into a boat now immediately.’

‘There’s an old saying: “Who seeks perfection must abandon joy”,’ said Dai-yu. ‘If you ask me, I think we are very well the way we are. Why do we have to be in a boat to enjoy this?’

Xiang-yun laughed.

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“‘One conquest breeds appetite for another.” That applies to most of us, you know, not only to generals.’

While she was speaking, a flute began to play. They listened for some moments to its plaintive rise and fail.

‘Grandma and Aunt Wang are obviously enjoying themselves,’ said Dai-yu, smiling. The flute is a very happy touch. We shall put it to our own purposes, you and I. It shall inspire our verse. We both like pentameters, don’t we? Let’s do linked pentameters as we did on that other occasion.’

‘What rhyme?’ said Xiang-yun.

‘We could use a number for a rhyme,’ said Dai-yu. ‘Let’s count the uprights in the railing as far as that angle over there. Whatever the number is shall be our rhyme.’

‘That’s a very ingenious idea,’ said Xiang-yun.

The two girls got up and walked along the railing to count. It turned out that there were exactly eight posts from one angle of the railing to the next.

‘Hmn,’ said Xiang-yun. ‘Eight. I wonder how far we shall get with that rhyme. The danger with this sort of thing always is that after a time the rhyming becomes forced - or else one simply can’t go on at all. Well, you begin.’

‘I’d like to have been able to see afterwards which of us had done better,’ said Dai-yu, ‘but unfortunately we haven’t got anything to write with.’

‘I’ll write it out tomorrow,’ said Xiang-yun. ‘I may not be very clever, but I’ve got a reasonably good memory.’

‘All right,’ said Dai-yu. ‘I’ll start with something very prosy and obvious.’

DAI-YU:
Fifteenth night of the Eighth, Mid-Autumn moon -

Xiang-yun thought a bit before following.

XIANG-YUN:
Whose joys the First Full Moon’s do emulate,
Under your crystal-constellation heaven -

DAI-TU:
The sounds of music everywhere pulsate.
At many a hoard the reckless winecups fly -

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‘Ha! I like the “reckless winecups”,’ said Xiang-yun. ‘I must try to do them justice. Let me see.’

She thought for a bit.

XIANG-YUN:

Where friends are met your feast to celebrate.

The air is crisp, the wind more bracing blows –

'You finished the couplet very well,' said Dai-yu, 'but that second line is a bit weak, isn't it?'

'We've got a long way to go and the rhyming will soon begin to get harder,' said Xiang-yun. 'I want to save up any good ideas I may have until later.'

'Mind you produce some good lines later then,' said Dai-yu. 'Otherwise you are going to look pretty silly!'

She proceeded to finish the couplet.

DAI-YU:

In the clear sky the cold stars scintillate.

Grey hairs are mocked when they for cakes dispute -'

I don't like that line,' said Xiang-yun. 'It *sound* like an allusion, but I think you have just made it up to confuse me.'

'That shows you don't read much,' said Dai-yu. 'It's a perfectly good allusion. There's a story about quarrelling over cakes in the *Official history of the Tang Dynasty*. I'll show you it tomorrow.'

'Well, anyway, I'm not going to be confused,' said Xiang yun. 'I can cap that line.'

XIANG-YUN:

Green girls divide the melons, eight and eight.

New scents the jade-like cassia have enriched -'

Now that really is a bogus allusion,' said Dai-yu.

'We'll look both our allusions up tomorrow and the others can judge between us,' said Xiang-yun. 'In the meanwhile, let's get on with this and stop wasting time.'

'That's all very well,' said Dai-yu, 'but I don't like your other line either. We ought to be able to manage without cliches like "lade-like cassia". I call that mere padding.'

DAI-YU:

Closed day4ilies the morrow's gold gestate.

A blaze of candles gilds the radiant feasters –

"'Gold gestate "!' said Xiang-yun. 'Well, that's one way of getting a rhyme - a pretty cheap one if you ask me And your second line is quite as much padding as mine was.'

'If you hadn't started with "jade-like cassia", I shouldn't have brought in my gold-gestating day-lilies,' said Dai-yu. 'And as regards my second line, I should have thought a few words on the brilliance of the feast were called for, in order to do justice to the occasion.'

Since Dai-yu was evidently not going to concede anything, Xiang-yun was obliged to finish off the couplet.

XIANG-YUN:

Whom frequent sconcings soon inebriate.

Competing, they observe the game's strict order –

'Ah, that's a good line!' said Dai-yu.

She thought a bit before capping it.

DAI-YU:

And rules for 'I spy' gravely promulgate.

Some shake the pretty dice and make them roll –

'I like "gravely promulgate",' said Xiang-yun, laughing. 'It lifts a vulgar subject up and gives it tone. But then your "dice" in the next line bring us back again to the banal.'

She followed as best she could.

XIANG-YUN:
Or, to the drum's quick beat, the branch rotate.
The clear rays glint on roofs and courts below -

'Well capped!' said Dai-yu. 'But then in your next line you wander off the track. Is that the best you can do, padding out with that stuff about moonlight?'

'In point of fact we haven't said much about the moon yet,' said Xiang-yun. 'Surely a few words on the subject are in order? Isn't that what our poem is supposed to be about?'

'All right, let it pass,' said Dai-yu. 'We'll have another look at it tomorrow.'

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She continued.

DAI-YU:
And all in silvery light illuminate.
Prizes and forfeits impartially they ponder -

'Oh dear! are we back with that lot again?' said Xiang-yun. 'Why not something about ourselves for a change?'

XIANG-YUN:

Sibling verse-contests they adjudicate.

Poets lean on railings, seeking inspiration –

'You've managed to get round to *us* at last!' said Dai-yu.

DAI-YU:

Or hunt for rhymes, propped up against a gate.

The excitement lingers, though the party's over –

'Oh, does it?' said Xiang-yun.

XIANG-YUN:

The 'sounds of music softly terminate.

Slowly the talk and laughter fade to silence-

'It's getting harder all the time now to rhyme,' said Dai-yu.

DAI-YU:

Leaving a moonscape hushed and desolate.

On dewy steps the tiny toadstools sprout –

'Just a minute, I can't think how to rhyme this,' said Xiang-yun.

She got up and paced to and fro, hands clasped behind her, thinking.

'Ha, yes, that'll do!' she said after some moments. 'Good job I thought of that word, otherwise I might have had to give up.'

XIANG-YUN:
Tight-curled albizzia bushes pernoctate.
A rain-swelled swirl rips through the brook-bed rocks -Dai-yu leapt to her feet, unable to restrain a cry of admiration.

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‘You wretch! You certainly *have* left the good things till last. “Pernoctate” is a splendid word. But what is “albizzia” for goodness’ sake?’
‘I came across it yesterday in the *Prose Anthology,*’ said Xiang-yun. ‘I was going to look it up because I didn’t know what kind of tree it was, but Cousin Chai told me I didn’t need to: she said it was another name for what we nowadays call “mimosa”. I didn’t believe her, so I looked it up all the same. She was right. That girl knows everything.’

‘Well, it was very clever of you to have thought of it,’ said Dai-yu, smiling, ‘especially as mimosa does in fact close up at night. But that “rain-swelled swirl” line is brilliant. That single line is worth all the lines we have made up so far put together. I shall have to think very carefully before capping it. I very much doubt whether, even so, I shall be able to think of anything as good.’
After thinking for a while, she produced the following.

DAI-YU:

And wind-combed leaves on ledges congregate.
The Weaving Maid in lonely splendour shines -

‘Your capping line is not at all bad,’ said Xiang-yun, ‘but that second line wanders off the track a bit. Still, I suppose you could say your “Weaving Maid” is saved from being mere padding by the “lonely”. It introduces an element of feeling into the line.’

XIANG-YUN:

Damp airs the silver Toad of the moon inflate.
See where the Hare immortal medicine pounds -

Dai-yu nodded silently for some moments before reciting her own two lines.

DAI-YU:

Thither Chang E was forced to emigrate.
A man moves upwards through the constellations -

Xiang-yun, gazing up at the moon, also nodded.

XIANG-YUN:

A raft floats skywards with a human freight.
Waxing or waning, the moon’s face, ever changing –

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‘That capping line is not good,’ said Dai-yu. ‘It merely repeats what my line said in other words. You manage to get clear again with your second line. I suppose you wanted to compensate for the sameness of the first couplet by making a big jump in the second.’

DAI-YU:

Its substance changeless and inanimate.
Soon the clepsydra’s night-long drip will cease –

Xiang-yun was about to continue when Dai-yu drew her attention to a black shape in the middle of the lake.

‘Look, in that dark shadow there, like a human shape! Do you think it could be a ghost?’

Xiang-yun laughed.

‘Oh, she’s seeing ghosts now! I’m not afraid of ghosts. I shall throw a stone at it.’

She bent down to pick up a pebble and hurled it into the centre of the lake. They heard a plop and saw the distorted image of the moon expand and contract as concentric ripples travelled outwards from the shattered surface. There was a loud squawk, and from the middle of the dark shadow a white stork flew up and flapped his way across the water in the direction of Lotus Pavilion.
'So that's who it was!' said Dai-yu. 'I wasn't expecting him to be there. He gave me quite a shock.'
'I'm very grateful to that stork,' said Xiang-yun. 'He's given me a first line for the next couplet.'

XIANG-YUN:

Black shades the lamp's last gleams annihilate

A stork's dark shape crosses the cold, bright water –

Dai-yu murmured admiringly, but stamped with vexation when she began to think about finishing the

couplet.
'Wretched stork, coming to her aid like that! This is not like the "rain-swelled swirl" couplet: I'm not going to be able to complete it by paralleling the whole line. A contrast for the dark moving shape is the most I can hope for. But your line is so natural, so simple and expressive. I feel almost like giving up.'

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'Perhaps if we both thought about it we could finish it together,' said Xiang-yun. 'Or, if you prefer, let's break off now and you can try again tomorrow.'
Dai-yu stared up at the sky, ignoring her. Suddenly, after remaining immobile for some seconds, she gave a little laugh.
'Stop your chatter, girl! I can finish this couplet. Listen:

DAI- yu:

Where, moon-embalmed, a dead muse lies in state.

Xiang-yun clapped her hands.
'Excellent! Couldn't be better! I love your "dead muse"!' She sighed. 'I mean excellent from a purely poetic point of view, because it's so original. It's a bit morbid, though. I don't think it can be good for a person in your state of health to indulge in such chilling fantasies.'
'With you to compete against, how else could I keep my end up?' said Dai-yu. 'Because I put so much into that last line-'
Just at that moment a figure stepped out from behind the spur of rock beyond the tailings.
'Bravo! An excellent line!' said this person. 'But it is, indeed, a little too melancholy. Don't do any more. If you go on from there, the danger is that you may produce something forced and mechanical, which instead of offsetting the beauty of your line will merely spoil it.'
Startled by this unexpected interruption, the two girls looked hard in the direction from which it came and with some surprise recognized the speaker as Adamantina.
'What are *you* doing here?' they asked her.
'Hearing the sounds of your moon-watching party, followed later by the sound of a flute playing, I was tempted to come out and enjoy the moon myself. I wanted to see it over this open expanse of water, where it appears to most advantage, and as I approached, I could hear you both reciting. Such pure refinement constrained me to stay and listen. But there were lines which, in spite of their excellence contained a note of almost decadent melancholy, lines which made me fearful for the person uttering them. That is why I came out of my concealment and prevented you from going on. Lady Jia has

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long since broken up the party. Everyone else in the Garden must be in bed by now. I wonder where your maids are. Doubtless they are somewhere looking for you. Are you not afraid of catching cold? Come with me, and I shall give you some hot tea to drink. It must be nearly dawn.'
Dai-yu laughed.
'I'd no idea the night was so far advanced.'
The three of them walked together to **Green** Bower Hermitage. A faint light still flickered in the Buddha shrine and the incense in the burner gave off a tiny smoke. All the old lay-sisters were asleep. A little maid, nodding sleepily on Adamantina's meditation mat, appeared to be the only person still up. She roused herself when Adamantina called to her and made some tea with water from the already boiling kettle. Just

at that moment there was a knocking at the gate and the little maid hurried to open it. It turned out to be Nightingale and Kingfisher with two or three old womenservants, looking for their mistresses. They found their mistresses drinking tea inside.

'Well!' they said. 'You've led us a fine old dance! We've been all over the Garden looking for you. We even tried Mrs Xue's outside. In the end we happened to go to that little pavilion under the mountain, just as the caretakers were waking up. When we asked them about you they said, "There were two people talking outside on the covered verandah a while ago, then a third one came along and we heard them saying they were going to the Hermitage." That's how we knew you were here.'

Adamantina told the little maid to take them round to the back where they could sit down and have some tea. She herself took paper, inkstone, brush and ink and began writing out the poem in linked couplets at the other two's dictation.

Dai-yu was impressed by Adamantina's enthusiasm.

'I have never before liked to ask for your opinions about poetry because I have never before seen you show so much interest,' she said; 'but since you now obviously are in the mood for discussing it, won't you please favour us with some criticism? If you think that what we have done is no good at

all, let us burn it; hut if you can see ways of improving it, do please correct it for us.'

'I certainly would not presume to alter any of it,' said Adamantina smiling; 'but as there are no less than twenty-three couplets here, I am pretty sure that all your best lines must have been used up by now, and that if you were to go on, there would be a danger that you might begin to flag. What I should have liked to do would have been to go on for you myself; but I am afraid that if I did, I might only succeed in adding a dog's tail to your leopard-skin!'

Dai-yu had never seen Adamantina compose poetry before and took her up eagerly on her obvious willingness to do so now.

'Oh *please* do, if you have a mind to! Though our verses may be of little value, they will *gain* distinction by being associated with yours.'

'In order to conclude what you have done so far,' said Adamantina, 'it will be necessary to bring the poem back to what we Buddhists call the "proper aspect". If we continue to abandon reality and go chasing after the bizarre and the supernatural, we shall be guilty not only of unmaidenliness but also of losing sight of our subject.'

Mesdemoiselles Lin and Shi agreed.

Adamantina picked up the brush and began, muttering and writing by turns, until, having knocked off some dozen or so couplets, all in the same apparently effortless manner, she laid the brush down again and handed the paper over for the other two to read. This is what she had written:

In golden censers figured incense burns;
Unguents in their lade pots coagulate.

A flute provokes the grieving widow's weeping;
She craves some warmth her bed's chill to abate.

Its cheerless hangings stir in the wind of autumn,
Its love-ducks mock a mistress without mate

Thick dews make treacherous the slippery moss,
And spears of frost the tall bamboos serrate

Better the winding lakeside path to follow,
Or lonely hilltop to perambulate

Bound demons seem to writhe in the tortured rock-shapes; In the trees' black shadows wild things pullulate.

Light's harbingers begin with the dark to struggle,
And morning's first dews to accumulate

Birds in a thousand treetops wake the woodland;
In the echoing valley sad apes ululate.

My footsteps tread the path's familiar turnings,
Nor need the stream's source to investigate.

From **Green** Bower convent sounds the matin bell;
And Sweet-rice cocks the dawn anticipate.

Why should this rapt enjoyment end in sorrow,
Or timid cares our conscience irritate?

Poets ought in themselves to find their pleasure,
Not in the message they communicate.

As daylight breaks let none of us plead tiredness,
But over tea continue our debate.

At the end of these couplets she had written down the title for the whole poem:

Mid-Autumn Night in Prospect Garden: A Poem in Thirty-five Couplets

Dai-yu and Xiang-yun were full of admiration.

'Strange that we should be always looking round for poetic talent,' they said, 'and all the time we have had a poet like you on our very doorstep! These verses of yours make anything we have ever done look very amateurish.'

'I must have another look at them tomorrow and touch them up a bit,' said Adamantina smiling. 'It's already dawn. We really must go to bed.'

Dai-yu and Xiang-yun got up and took their leave. Their maids left with them. Adamantina saw them outside the gate and stood a long while watching them go. They had already covered a good part of the way back when she at last went in again and closed the gate after her.

Kingfisher wanted Xiang-yun to go to Li Wan's place to sleep.

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'The people at Mrs Thu's are expecting you, miss. You ought to go there.'

'Drop in there on the way and tell them not to wait up for me any longer,' said Xiang-yun. 'Mrs Thu is still ill. If I went back there to sleep now, I'm afraid I might disturb her. If I'm going to disturb anyone, let it be Miss Lin.'

When they reached the Naiad's House, they found half the servants there asleep. The girls took off their ornaments and outer clothes, washed, and got into bed. Nightingale let down the bed-curtains, and having set the lamp down within easy reach of the bed, went out and closed the door.

But neither of the girls could sleep, Xiang-yun because she always had difficulty in getting to sleep in a strange bed, and Dai-yu because her anaemic condition always made sleeping difficult for her, and because on this occasion she had long since passed beyond tiredness, so that for her sleep was in any case out of the question. For a long time the two of them lay tossing and turning on the bed.

'Can't you get to sleep?' Dai-yu asked Xiang-yun eventually.

'I can never get to sleep in a strange bed,' said Xiang-yun with a rueful laugh. 'Anyway, I'm too tired to get to sleep. I'll just have to lie and rest. Can't you get to sleep either?'

Dai-yu sighed.

'This is no novelty for me,' she said. 'I don't suppose I get more than ten really good nights' sleep in a year.'

'No wonder you're always ill,' said Xiang-yun.

Our story continues in the following chapter.

CHAPTER 77

A wronged maid takes a loving
last leave of her master
And three young actresses seek to
escape matrimony in the cloister

To Lady Wang it appeared that, with the passing of the MidAutumn festival, Xi-feng's condition had improved considerably. True, she was still far from well, but she could get about in the house now and even venture out of doors. The physician, who, notwithstanding this improvement, had on Lady Wang's instructions been requested to continue his daily visits, was now recommending a course of pills designed to regularize her periods and make some new blood to replace the quantities she had lost. Observing that the prescription for these pills included two ounces of the best quality ginseng, Lady Wang ordered her maids to

get out her own supply. After much rummaging they found a few pieces not much thicker than a large hairpin in one of the little medicine-boxes. When they showed them to Lady Wang, she thought them of too inferior a quality and ordered the maids to look again; but further searching produced only a large packet of 'whiskers' broken off from the rootlets.
'When one doesn't need this stuff, there is always plenty of it,' said Lady Wang testily. 'It is only when *we* want some that you can't find any. I am always telling you: you must keep a proper check on things and you must keep them together, but you won't do as I say: you *will* leave things lying around all over the place, and then afterwards you never know where to look for them.'
'I think this is all the ginseng we've got,' said Suncloud. 'That time Lady Xing came for some, I think she must have taken it all.'
'Nonsense!' said Lady Wang. 'Go and look again. And look properly this time!'

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Suncloud had to go off and search some more. She came back bearing several packets of herbs.
'I don't know what is in these, Your Ladyship. If there isn't any ginseng in any of these, then we really haven't got any.'
Lady Wang opened the packets. She had no recollection of what they contained and could not identify the contents, but she could tell at a glance that none of them contained any ginseng. She sent someone to Xi-feng's room to ask if Xi-feng had got any herself. Xi-feng came over to reply.
'I've only got extract of ginseng,' she said. 'Actually I have got a few dried leaves and whiskers, but they are not of good quality and I use them every day in my infusions.'
Lady Wang was obliged to ask Lady Xing; but she, too, was unable to oblige.
Lady Wang was now reduced to going round in person to Grandmother Jia and begging some from her. Grandmother Jia at once asked Faithful to get out whatever remained of her own supply. Fortunately there was still a large packetful. The roots were of various sizes, but mostly about the thickness of a finger. Faithful weighed out two ounces and gave them to Lady Wang, who carried them back to her own apartment and there handed them over to Zhou Rui's wife, together with the packets of unidentified herbs, instructing her to get one of the pages to carry them to the doctor. While he was about it, she said, he could determine what the herbs were and write their names on the packets.
When Zhou Rui's wife reappeared some time later, she was carrying not only the packets of herbs but also the ginseng.
'He's written the names on the packets,' she said. 'But this ginseng - he says it's very high quality ginseng, but it's too old. He says ginseng isn't like other medicines: no matter how good it is, after a hundred years or so it turns into dust. This ginseng here hasn't turned into dust yet, but he says it's already dried-up, like rotten wood. It's got no goodness in it. He told me to bring it back. He said tell Her Ladyship to try and get hold of some a bit fresher than this. It doesn't matter about the roots being a bit on the thin side as long as it's fresh.'

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Lady Wang bowed her head and thought for some moments in silence.
'I suppose there's nothing else for it. We shall just have to *buy* two ounces. - Take this stuff away I' she said, feeling no inclination to examine the packets. One of the maids removed them while she continued with her instructions to Zhou Rui's wife. 'Tell our buyer to pick out ginseng of the very best quality. He is to get it as cheaply as he can, of course, but it *must* be high quality ginseng. Oh, and if Lady Jia should ask any of you about this, tell her that we used the ginseng she gave us. Don't go prattling to her about what the doctor said.'
Zhou Rui's wife was about to go off on her errand when Bao-chai, who happened to be sitting in the room, smilingly intervened.
'Just a minute, Aunt. There is really no good ginseng to be had in the shops nowadays. If the dealers ever get hold of a whole root, they cut it into two or three sections which they carve into shape and graft crowns and rootlets onto so that they can make more money by passing off each section as a whole root. Our firm has quite a lot to do with the ginseng suppliers. If I had a word with Mamma about this, I am sure Pan could arrange for one of our people to get two ounces of whole, uncut root from the suppliers. It might cost rather a lot, but at least you could be sure that you were getting ginseng of the very highest quality.'
'You are so knowledgeable!' said Lady Wang gratefully. 'Would you do that then? I am sure it would be better for the request to come from you.'
Bao-chai left immediately and was gone for a long time.
'He's sent someone to see about it,' she said when she got back. 'We shall have a reply by this evening. That means that we ought to be able to get the stuff first thing tomorrow. That isn't too long to wait, is it?'
Lady Wang was delighted, though her comment was a somewhat rueful one.
'We have always kept a supply of ginseng in the past, and we have given I don't know how much away to other people; but now that we want some ourselves, we have to run around looking for it elsewhere.'

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She sighed.
'Although ginseng is so costly, it is only a medicine,' said Bao-chai consolingly. 'As such it *ought* to be given away to others, so that its benefit may be spread as widely as possible. People in our position cannot behave like ill-bred parvenus who hoard their ginseng like an heirloom and can only under the most exceptional circumstances be induced to part with any.'
Lady Wang nodded.
'Yes, I suppose you are right.'
A little later, after Bao-chai had gone and there was no one else with her in the room, Lady Wang called Zhou Rui's wife over to ask about another matter.
'When you made that search in the Garden the other day, did you find what you were looking for?'
Zhou Rui's wife had already consulted Xi-feng about what Lady Wang should be told and Xi-feng had insisted that there should be no concealment; she therefore told her everything. Lady Wang was deeply shocked. When she had somewhat recovered from her surprise and begun thinking what to do, it occurred to her that, as Chess was Ying-chun's maid and therefore really a member of Lady Xing's establishment, it would first be necessary to acquaint Lady Xing with the facts before proceeding any further. Zhou Rui's wife had her own ideas on the subject.
'Lady Xing was so angry with Wang Shan-bao's wife for meddling that she boxed her ears and Wang Shan-bao's wife has kept at home ever since, pretending to be ill. She certainly won't have spoken to Lady Xing about this matter because Chess is her own daughter's child and it would be like slapping her own face if she did so I expect she's pretending to have forgotten all about it and is just waiting for the whole affair to blow over. If *I* report it, Lady Xing will like as not take umbrage and say that *I* am interfering. It would be best simply to take Chess and the things we found along to her and let her work it all out for herself. Probably she'll give Chess a beating and have her married to one of the boys and pick another maid for Miss Ying and that will be the end of the matter. But if I just go along and tell her, without taking Chess

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or the things, she'll probably think up some excuse for doing nothing. "If your mistress has found this out," she'll say, "why doesn't she deal with it herself? Why do you come here asking *me* about it?" That way it will get put off. Then suppose when no one is looking the girl finds some means of doing away with herself? We shall have a fine to-do on our hands! She's already been under guard now for two or three days. If we don't do something about her soon, we shall be simply asking for trouble.'
Lady Wang reflected for some moments.
'Yes, you are right,' she said at last. 'Do as you have suggested straight away then, and after that we will deal with our own young harpies.'
Now that she had her commission, Zhou Rui's wife got together several of the other women and took them with her to Ying-chun's apartment. Ying-chun listened with tears in her eyes while Zhou Rui's wife explained what she had come about, and it was evident that the idea of parting with Chess distressed her; on the other hand, as she had now heard something about the raid from the other maids and knew that this matter was connected in some way with morality, she felt that however painful the parting might be, there was probably nothing she could do to prevent it. Chess was unaware of this. She had pleaded with Ying-chun the morning after the discovery and was convinced that Ying-chun could save her if she had a mind to. It could only be her habitual reluctance to speak out, her usual weak irresolution, that now kept her silent. When it became clear that her mistress was determined to say nothing and that there was to be no escape for her, Chess fell down on her knees and reproached her tearfully.
'You have a cruel heart, miss! All through these last few days you have allowed me to go on hoping, but now, when the time comes, you won't say a single word to help me!'
'You surely don't expect Miss Ying to *keep* you?' said Zhou Rui's wife indignantly. 'Even if she did, what would all the other people in the Garden say? And how would you be able to look them in the face after what you have done? Take my advice: the best thing you can do is to pack your things up and get Out of here as quickly as possible, before anyone

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else has had a chance of finding out what you have been up to.'
'I know that you have done something serious,' said Yingchun tearfully. 'If I speak up for you or try to keep you, it will be all up with me too. Apart from that, look how quickly they got rid of Picture, in spite of all the years she had served Miss Xi: just "Out!" and out she went. I don't think it will stop at you and Picture. I think they must be planning to get rid of all the older girls in the Garden. We are all going to be separated sooner or later. If you ask me, I think you and I might just as well part now as any other time.'
'There, you see?' said Zhou Rui's wife. 'Miss Ying understands. There'll be plenty of others dismissed after you have gone, don't you worry!'
Since there was to be no respite, Chess, struggling to hold back her tears, made a last kotow to her mistress and said good-bye to the other maids. As she was leaving, she leaned forwards and whispered in Ying-chun's ear:
'Try and find out what's happening to me, miss. Put in a good word for me if you hear I'm suffering.'
'Of course I will,' said Ying-chun. There were tears in her own eyes as she said it.
Those were the last words spoken before Zhou Rui's wife and the other women took Chess away. Two old women accompanied them carrying her things. They had gone no more than a few steps out of the courtyard gate when little Tangerine came running after them and handed Chess a silk purse, while with the other hand she wiped her streaming eyes.
'This is from the mistress. She says it's hard to lose you after all the years you and she have been together and she wants you to have this to remember her by.'
As she received the purse, Chess was unable to restrain a further outburst of tears, and for some moments she and Tangerine clung together weeping, until Zhou Rui's wife, growing impatient, began hustling Chess on her way, forcing the two girls apart.
Chess spoke to the women imploringly:
'For charity's sake, couldn't you turn a blind eye just for a

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few minutes while I say good-bye to the maids in the other apartments? Some of the older ones I have known so long, they have become almost like sisters to me.'
Zhou Rui's wife and the other women all had work of their own to do which they had left unwillingly and were anxious to get back to; moreover all of them deeply resented the overbearing manner which Chess and the other senior maids had adopted towards them in the past; there was therefore little chance of their being moved by her plea.
'If I were you I should stop all this shilly-shallying and be on your way,' said Zhou Rui's wife coldly. 'We've got more important things to do than sit around waiting while you say your good-byes. In any case, they're not your real sisters, so what's the point of seeing them? It's only playing for time. You've got to leave in the end, however long you delay. You might just as well get it over with now, as quickly as possible.'
She hurried on towards the rear corner gate of the Garden. The hapless Chess, not daring to say another word, had to follow her out of it.
By coincidence, just as they were coming out of the Garden, they ran into Bao-yu who was returning to it from outside. Seeing Chess in the company of this grim escort and with the two older women behind her carrying a lot of things, he realized that she must be leaving the Garden for good. He had heard something now about the raid and had noticed that Skybright's sickness had grown more serious since her interview with his mother (though he could not induce her to say why). The realization that he was witnessing Chess's dismissal came as all the greater shock in the light of these other happenings. He stepped forwards impetuously and barred their way.
'Where are you going?'
Zhou Rui's wife knew Bao-yu from of old and greatly feared that they were now to be held up indefinitely with a lot of pointless chatter.
'It's nothing to do with you,' she said, smiling grimly. 'You get back to your books!'
'Just stop a moment, there's a good woman,' said Bao-yu appealingly, just long enough to hear what I've got to say.'

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'Her Ladyship told us we were under no circumstances to -delay,' said Zhou Rui's wife. 'There's nothing to be said. We've got our orders from Her Ladyship, that's all we're concerned about.'
Chess clung to Bao-yu and wept.
'There's nothing *they* can do. If you want to save me, you'll have to speak to Her Ladyship.'
Bao-yu was deeply upset. His eyes filled with tears.
'I don't know what terrible thing you are supposed to have done,' he said, 'but I know that something has upset Skybright and made her ill, and now *you* are going. What on earth is happening?'
Zhou Rui's wife turned on Chess angrily.
'You're not a lady's maid now, you know. *Now* if you don't do what I tell you, I have the right to beat you,

just like any other servant. You can't play fast and loose with us now and then run to your mistress to save you from the consequences. I've told you a number of times to be on your way, but you take no notice. A maid holding on to a young master -whoever heard of such a thing!'
At this the other women laid violent hands on Chess and hurried her away. Bao-yu, fearing that if he said anything it would only make matters worse, glared at them in silence; but he could not resist pointing his linger at them when they had gone and - *sotto voce* - giving bitter vent to his feelings:
'Strange, the way they get like this when they marry! It must be something in the male that infects them. If anything they end up even worse than the men!'
The old women on duty at the gate overheard this and could not help laughing at him.
'In that case all girls must be good and all women must be bad,' they said. 'You don't really believe that, do you?'
'Indeed I do,' said Bao-yu feelingly. 'That's precisely what I *do* believe.'
Just at that moment some other old women came hurrying up to them.
'Make sure you're all here in case Her Ladyship wants you,' said one of them. 'She's in the Garden now, making an inspection. And someone go and get Skybright's cousin and

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his wife, so that they'll be ready to take her away presently.' She chuckled. 'Holy Name! The Lord has opened his eyes at last! With that little pest out of the way, it will be a better place for all of us!'
At the old woman's mention of his mother's presence, Bao-yu, fearing that it might bode ill for Skybright, had rushed off immediately, so that he had missed the gloating remark which followed it. When he arrived at **Green** Delights, he found a small crowd of women waiting outside the door. His mother was sitting inside the room with anger written all over her face. She deliberately ignored him as he entered. Skybright, who had taken no nourishment of any kind for the past four or five days and was in too weak a state to get up, had been dragged from the kang and now stood facing her, propped up between two women. Her hair was in disarray and her face looked as if it needed washing.
'Throw out the clothes she has been wearing,' Lady Wang was saying. 'She can take them with her. The rest can be kept here and given to more deserving maids to wear.'
Having finished with Skybright, she ordered all the other maids to be called in, from Aroma down to the most junior maid-of-all-work, to be subjected to her scrutiny. Each and every one of them was in Lady Wang's opinion a potential corrupter of her boy.
'Which is the one whose birthday is on the same day as Bao-yu's?' she asked.
Since the girl herself would not answer, one of the old women pointed her out.
'This is the one, Your Ladyship: Citronella. She's called "Number Four". *She's* the one whose birthday is on the same day as Bao-yu's.'
Lady Wang examined the girl closely. Although not half as good4ooking as Skybright, she had a certain gracefulness about her, and intelligence shone out in her every feature. She was moreover better dressed than the other maids. Lady Wang sniffed scornfully.
'Another shameless young baggage! This is the one who said that those with the same birthday are destined to be husband and wife. You did say that, didn't you? You think

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that because I live away from here I don't know these things; but though I may not come here often myself, I have my eyes and ears here, watching you and listening to you all the time. Do you imagine that I would willingly allow my only son to be corrupted by creatures like you?'
Number Four reddened, hearing from Lady Wang's own lips the words she once said to Bao-yu in private. It was useless to deny that she had said them. She hung her head and wept.
'Tell her people to come and take her away,' said Lady Wang. 'She can be paired off with one of the boys.'
Exit Number Four.
Now which is the one with the foreign name?' said Lady Wang.
Parfumee-Aventurin stepped forward.
Oh, it is you. One *expects* an actress to be a vampire, but one had hoped, after you turned down the opportunity to go free and insisted on staying here, that you would make some effort to behave. Instead, it seems, you have turned your attentions on my son and been encouraging him to get up to I don't know what sorts of mischief.'
Parfumee smiled.
'I haven't encouraged him to get up to anything.'
Lady Wang smiled back at her.
'You would argue with *me*, would you? I suppose it is hardly surprising, considering the way you treated your own foster-mother while I was away. - Call her foster-mother!' she ordered. 'I make her a present of this girl. She can marry her to whomever she likes. And you can give her her things to take as well.'
Having thus disposed of Parfumee, she went on to give orders that *none* of the remaining ex-actresses were to stay any longer in the Garden. Their foster-mothers were to be summoned to collect them and allowed to

dispose of them as they wished. The delight and gratitude of these women when. they received the message can be imagined. They arranged among themselves to visit Lady Wang in a body and kowtow their thanks to her before going into the Garden to collect the girls.
Lady Wang now proceeded to inspect Bao-yu's things.

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Anything which looked at all unfamiliar she had put on one side. The whole lot were then wrapped up in one big bundle and carried to her own apartment.
'Much better make a clean sweep of these things,' she said. 'There will be that much less for people to gossip about.'
In conclusion she admonished Aroma and the remaining maids.
'Now be careful! From now on if I hear of anything the slightest bit unto ward happening, I shall have no mercy! I can't move you out yet, because there are still investigations in progress, but next year I shall have the whole lot of you moved back into the mansion, and then perhaps I shall be able to set my mind at rest.'
She went off at the head of her little troop of women, not even staying for a cup of tea.
When Bao-yu heard from the old woman of his mother's visit, he had expected something unpleasant but of no great consequence: perhaps another inspection of the maids' possessions. He was therefore quite unprepared for the raging tempest that had just passed over him. The things his mother had charged the maids with showed so uncanny a knowledge of even his most intimate conversations with them that there seemed little point in denial. He felt wretched enough to die, but it was clear that even self-immolation could achieve nothing while his mother's anger was at its height. He therefore followed after her in silence, until he had seen her as far as Drenched Blossoms Pavilion half-way across the bridge, when she peremptorily ordered him to return.
'Go back - and get on with your studies! Then next time your father asks you about them, you will at least be able to say that you have made a start.'
Bao-yu turned back. All the way back to **Green** Delights he was thinking to himself:
'Who's been blabbing? No one outside knows about these things. How did Mother get to hear about them?'
The question was continuing to trouble him when he entered his room. He noticed that Aroma was in tears.
'Well, she would be if *any* of the senior maids was leaving,' he thought. 'It's only natural.'

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He flung himself down on the bed and broke into loud sobs. Aroma tried to talk him out of his despair. She knew that, whatever might become of anyone else, it was Skybright that he was chiefly concerned about.

'Oh, do get up!' she said. 'What's the use of crying? I tell you, Skybright will be better off where she is going. Back at home she will at least be able to have a few days to herself in peace and quiet. And if you really can't bear to be without her, you have only to wait until Her Ladyship's anger has cooled down a bit and then go and ask Her Old Ladyship to have her brought back again. It shouldn't be difficult. Her Ladyship was acting in anger. Probably she had heard someone gossiping about her.'

'But what heinous crime is Skybright supposed to have committed?' said Bao-yu.

'Maybe she isn't,' said Aroma. 'Maybe Her Ladyship just thinks she is too good-looking. She probably thinks that anyone who is so good4ooking must be unreliable. She knows these very beautiful young women are often trouble-makers. Probably she dislikes Skybright just for being beautiful. It's better to be a plain, gawky person like me!'

'Who said that beautiful women are trouble-makers?' said Bao-yu. 'There have always been lots and lots of beautiful women who were nothing of the kind. But never mind all that. What I can't understand is, how did Mother get to hear about all those private jokes of ours? No one outside could have told her. It's very, very strange.'

'Look how careless you are,' said Aroma. 'Once you get a bit excited you are capable of saying anything, regardless of who else is around. Many and many's the time I have given you a look or made some sign to warn you, but you never notice.'

'Maybe,' said Bao-yu, 'but tell me this. How is it that she'd heard something damaging about every single person in this apartment except you and Musk and Ripple?'

Somewhat taken aback by this question, Aroma hung her head and pondered it for some moments, but she was unable to think of an explanation. She laughed embarrassedly.

'I agree, it *is* rather strange. We three must often have made

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careless remarks that could have been used against us. I wonder why Her Ladyship didn't mention any? Perhaps she'll come back and deal with us three later.'

'You?' said Bao-yu, laughing incredulously. 'The famous paragon of *all* the virtues? There's little danger of her finding fault *with you.* Or with those other two, whom you trained *and* moulded in your own Image. Parfumee I *can* understand:

she is young and precocious and inclined to use her intelligence for putting other people down, so it's hardly surprising that she should be disliked. Number Four's unpopularity I blame myself for. It dates from that time when you and I had quarrelled about something and I allowed her to wait on me in your place. The others must have resented my giving her special treatment, and that, ultimately, must be the reason for what has happened to her today. But why Skybright? You and she started together with my grandmother when you were little girls. It's true she is a bit better-looking than the rest of you, but she has never taken advantage of that fact: no one has ever been made to feel threatened by it. Even her forthrightness - and she could be quite sharp-tongued on occasion - has never, as far as I am aware, given serious offence. I suppose it must be as you say: her good looks have been her undoing.'

He concluded by once more bursting into tears.

Mulling over what he had just said, Aroma concluded that it could only mean that he suspected her. There seemed little point in protesting. She sighed.

'There's One above who knows the truth of the matter; but I don't suppose *we* shall find out who it was for a while yet. At all events, crying isn't going to help. Much better keep your spirits up and next time Her Old Ladyship is feeling cheerful, explain what has happened and ask to have Skybright back again.'

'You only say that to humour me,' said Bao-yu bitterly. 'According to you I am to wait until Mother's anger has subsided and after that wait until a favourable opportunity arises for talking to Grandmother; but what makes you think that Skybright's illness will wait that long? Ever since she came into our family as a child she has lived comfortably. She has

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never had to experience a single day of real hardship. Sending her to that place now is like taking a potted orchid that has just started putting out its first tender spears of growth and setting it down in a pigsty. Apart from being physically ill, she must be in a terrible state mentally as well. And she has no kind parents to look after her, don't forget: only that worthless cousin and his wife. I doubt she'll last there a fortnight. I may not even be able to see her again.'

'Curfew for the common people, but the Prefect can light a fire,' said Aroma drily. 'What a fuss you'd have made if *I'd* said anything so unlucky! How can you bear to talk so glibly about her dying?'

'It isn't unlucky to talk about what has already been fore-told,' said Bao-yu. 'There was a portent of her coming death last spring.'

'Oh?' said Aroma in some surprise. 'What was that?'

'The crabapple tree in the courtyard here: only one half of it budded this year; the other side seems to have died. I knew at the time that something awful must be going to happen; now I can see that it must have been a portent of her death.'

Aroma laughed out loud.

'Forgive me, but I just can't help myself. You really are an old woman! And you supposed to be so educated! How can what happens to trees and plants have anything to do with human beings?'

Bao-yu sighed.

'What do you know about it? Not only plants and trees, but all things that live and grow have feelings. And like us, they are most responsive to those who most appreciate them. There are plenty of examples from history: the juniper tree in front of the temple of Confucius, the milfoil that grows beside his tomb, the cypress in front of Zhu-ge Liang's shrine, the pine-tree that grows in front of Yue Fei's grave: all those paragons of the vegetable world, mightily endowed with vital essence and able to withstand the ravages of the centuries, have withered and dried up in times of disorder, only to flourish once more when times were prosperous. In the course of a thousand or more years all of them have died and come

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to life again several times over. If those are not portents, what are they? On a somewhat less exalted level there are the peonies beside Yang Gui-fei's Aloeswood Pavilion, the rhododendrons of the Duan-cheng-lou and the ever**green** grass on Lady Bright's grave. Surely you can't deny that all these are instances of sympathy between plants and humans? I see no reason to doubt that our crab-apple tree too was reacting to a human situation.'

By the time his idiotic: discourse had ended, Aroma did not know whether to laugh or groan.

'You really make me angry,' she said, 'comparing Skybright with all those famous people! What sort of creature do you think she is anyway? And even if she u so wonderful, you seem to forget that I have precedence over her among your maids. If the crab-apple is connected with any of us, it ought to be me. It

must mean that *I* am going to die.'
Bao-yu clapped his hand over her mouth.
'Now, now, that's enough of that! I'm already worried enough about *her* as it is, I don't want to have to worry about you as well. Let's say no more about it. Three people is quite enough to lose in one day!'
Aroma was secretly glad to hear him say this.
'If I hadn't said that to stop him,' she thought, 'heaven knows where this nonsense would have ended!'
'There's something else I want to discuss with you,' said Bao-yu. 'I'm not quite sure whether you'll agree to this or not. Couldn't we somehow, without letting any of the family know about it, contrive to let her have her things? Perhaps we could also send her a few strings of whatever money we have managed to save, so that she has got something to buy medicines with. Could you, for the sake of all your years together, do this for her?'
Aroma laughed.
'Do you really think I need asking? What a mean, inhuman sort of person you must think I am! I've got her clothes and all her other things piled up over there, ready to send her. I can't send them now, in broad daylight. With so many prying eyes about it would be simply asking for trouble. But as soon as it's evening I shall get Mrs Liu to take

them to her. I've got several strings of cash that she can take to her as well.'
Bao-yu nodded.
'I *am* a paragon of all the virtues, don't forget,' said Aroma teasingly. 'It's worth spending a bit of money to keep up my reputation!'
Bao-yu smiled and said a few words to comfort her. He was afraid that she might have taken what he said earlier to heart.
That evening, when things had quietened down a bit, he slipped out on his own to the tear corner gate of the Garden and begged one of the old women there to take him to Skybright's house. At first she refused absolutely to help. She was too scared, she said. What would become of her rice-bowl if Lady Wang got to hear of it? In the end, after he had pleaded with her very insistently and also promised her some money, she agreed to take him.

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Skybright was in the first instance purchased, when she was barely ten years old, by the Chief Steward Lai Da as a little slave-girl for his wife, who often took Skybright with her when she went to work in Rong-guo House. It was in this way that she first came to the attention of Grandmother Jia. Grandmother Jia took a great fancy to the beautiful, intelligent little girl, and when Lai Da's wife noticed this, she gave Skybright to the old lady as a present. It was because the old lady thought so highly of Skybright that she later on gave her as a maidservant to her beloved grandson.

Skybright had no recollection of her parents or of the place where she was born. The only relation she knew of was a cousin somewhat older than herself, said to be her father's sister's son, who was in bondservice elsewhere. After her instalment at the mansion she begged Lai Da's wife to have this cousin purchased too and find him some employment with the Jias. The stewardess was touched by the gratitude and respect that Skybright continued to show her after her advancement. At her insistence Lai Da purchased the cousin, gave him a small job as a buyer, and even provided him with a wife.

Unfortunately Skybright's cousin was a timorous, poor spirited creature, whereas the wife Lai Da had chosen for him was a lively and rather attractive young woman. Finding her husband unable to provide her with what she wanted, she soon took to going out every day, dressed up to the nines, to exercise her charms on the other servants. She was aided in this by a highly expressive pair of eyes which seldom failed to convey their message. The men were drawn towards her irresistibly, like flies towards carrion, so that there was seldom any lack of volunteers to fill the gap left by her neglectful husband.
The couple lived in an apartment not far from the rear side gate of the Garden, and it was to this place that Skybright was taken after her dismissal. The cousin's young wife had little stomach for nursing a sick relation, and as soon as she had eaten, was off on her customary rounds, leaving Skybright alone and untended in the outer room.
When Bao-yu arrived at the house, he told the old woman who had brought him to wait at the gate and keep a look-out while he went inside. Raising the cotton door-curtain he looked into the room. He could see Skybright at once, lying on an old rush mat on the kang (fortunately she still had her own bedding) but no one else appeared to be at home, and he wondered for a moment what he should do; then, going over to the kang, he plucked timidly at the quilt in which she was wrapped and gently called her name. His eyes were full of tears.

Skybright, who had been ill to start with, had been made even more so by the detestable things said to her by her cousin and his wife since her arrival. After coughing through most of the day, she had recently dozed off into a fitful sleep, and it was not until Bao-yu had called her name for the second time that she opened her eyes. What surprise, delight, sorrow, anguish all mixed in one when she saw who it was! She gripped his hand tightly in hers, but for a long time she could only sob. At last she managed to speak.
'I didn't think I should ever see you again.'
After that she coughed and coughed. Bao-yu was sobbing now himself.

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'Holy Name, it's a good job you've come!' she said. 'Could you get me half a cup of tea? I'm so thirsty, but though I've called and called, no one ever comes.'
Bao-yu hurriedly wiped his eyes.
'Where's the tea?'
'It's over there on the stove,' said Skybright.
Bao-yu looked at the brick-and-mud-built stove against the wall. There was only a sort of blackened earthenware skillet on it that bore no resemblance to a tea-pot. He found a teacup on the table whose greasy, rancid odour reached his nostrils even before he picked it up. Having located some water, he washed it twice, rinsed it twice, dried it with his handkerchief, sniffed it (it still smelt) and half filled it with a dusky, reddish liquid from the skillet. *Was* it' tea? He tasted it dubiously. It had a bitter, acrid taste with only a slight suggestion of tea about it.
'That's tea,' said Skybright, who had raised herself on the pillow. 'Please let me have it. You can't expect it to be as good as ours.'
Bao-yu handed it to her and she gulped it down greedily as if it were the most delicious nectar. He watched her with tears running down his cheeks, suddenly ashamed of his own fastidiousness.
'If there's anything you want to tell me,' he said, 'you'd better tell me now, while there's nobody else about.'
'What have I got to tell?' said Skybright. 'I'm living now from day to day and from hour to hour. I know I'm done for: it can't be more than four or five days now at the most. If it weren't for one thing, I could die content. I know I'm a bit better-looking than the others, but I've never tried to make up to you. Why *will* they insist that I am some sort of vampire? It's so unfair. And now I have so little time left. I ought not to say this, but if I'd known in advance that it would be like this, I might have behaved rather differently.'
She began to cry again.
Bao-yu took her hands in his own. They felt like bundles of dried twigs, so wasted had she become. She was still wearing a pair of silver bangles on either wrist.
'Better take these off,' he said (he was crying himself as he spoke). 'You can put them on again when you are better.'

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He took them off for her and put them under the pillow.
'It's a pity about these nails,' he said. 'It took you such a long time to grow them. By the time you are better, I expect you'll find that quite a lot of them will have broken off.'
She wiped her eyes, curled the third and fourth fingers of her left hand back against the side of her mouth and with a supreme effort half bit half tore off the two two-inch lengths of scallion-like nail that projected from them.
'Here!' She put the pieces into his hand. 'To remind you of me.'
Then she reached down inside the bedding and managed, after a great deal of struggling, to take off the old **red** chemise she was wearing and hold it out to him. Because of her weakness, the effort of doing this made her pant so much that she could not speak; but Bao-yu understood what she wanted. He removed his outer garment, took off the shirt he was wearing underneath it and laid it over her, and put on the chemise she was holding out to him. He did not bother to do the buttons up, since it would be hidden anyway beneath his outer garment. While he was fastening his belt on again, he noticed that she was staring at him, trying to say something.
'Help me up!'
Even with Bao-yu's assistance it cost her a good deal of effort to sit fully upright. Once she was sitting up, she stretched one of her arms out and tried drawing the shirt on herself. Bao-yu draped it over her shoulders and eased each of her arms in turn into the sleeves, then gently laid her down again.
'If anyone sees that when you get back and asks you whose it is,' said Skybright, weeping, 'there's no need to tell them any lies. Tell them it's mine. Since I've got such a bad reputation anyway, I might as well have something to show for it when I'm gone!'
At that moment the door-curtain was lifted and the cousin's wife came into the room, all dazzling smiles.
'Very nice! I've heard all that you two have been saying.' She directed a bold look at Bao-yu. 'And what are you doing, a young master like you, coming to see us servants in our

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quarters? Bet you heard I was young and good-looking and came here to flirt with me!'

'Please, I beg of you, don't speak so loud!' said Bao-yu entreatingly. 'I shouldn't really be here, but your cousin was with me for many years: I came here to see her because she is ill.'

The young woman smiled and nodded approvingly.

'That's right. They say you have a good heart.'

She took him by the hand and pulled him after her into the inner room.

'If you don't want me to make a noise, you can easily stop me. You have only to do one little thing.'

She got her backside up onto the kang and drawing him down on top of her, put up her legs and gripped him tightly between them. This was something totally outside Bao-yu's experience. His heart started pounding wildly, his face turned **scarlet,** and his whole body began to tremble. It would have been hard to say what feeling was at that moment uppermost in his mind: embarrassment, shame, fear or annoyance. All he could manage to say was:

'Don't fool about, *please!*'

The young woman leered up at him through half-closed eyes. 'Get away with you! From what I've been told, you've had plenty of practice with other girls. What makes you so bashful today all of a sudden?'

Bao-yu became even redder.

'Please let me go. If you've got anything to talk about, let's discuss it like reasonable human beings. There's an old woman outside there listening. What do you think you are doing?'

'There's no old woman out there,' she said. 'I saw her when I got back and told her to wait for you at the Garden gate. Come on! I've waited a long time to get my hands on you. If you won't do what I ask, I'll call out. You're a bold one, aren't you, coming here! What will Her Ladyship say if she finds out? I was listening to you two outside the window for quite a while. From what I could make out, you and she have nothing between you. Well, more fool she, if that's the case! You needn't expect *me* to be so daft!'

She began to get to work on his clothing, while Bao-yu

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made frantic efforts to pull himself away. They were still struggling when a voice was heard outside the window asking for Skybright. The young woman gave a start and let go of Bao-yu. Bao-yu was so shaken and confused that he had not heard the voice, and Skybright, listening to what was going on in the next room, was so overcome with shame and anger that she had fainted clean away. This left only the cousin's wife to answer the caller - or rather callers, for when she went outside to look, it turned Out to be Cook Liu and Fivey with a bundle containing Skybright's things. Cook Liu was also holding several strings of cash.

'We've brought these from Miss Aroma for your young lady,' she said. 'Which room is she in?'

The young woman laughed.

'This room here. Where else would we keep her?'

As Cook Liu and Fivey went into the outer room, a lurking figure dodged into the inner room at the back. Cook Liu knew something of the young wife's reputation and assumed that it must be one of her lovers. Since Skybright appeared to be asleep, she put the things down beside her and hurried out again. But Fivey had sharper eyes than her mother and had recognized the lurking figure as Bao-yu.

'Didn't Miss Aroma say when we were leaving that she'd been looking for Master Bao?' she asked her mother.

'Goodness, I nearly forgot!' said Cook Liu. 'Mrs Song told me just now that she thought she'd seen him go

out of the side gate. And there was someone waiting for him outside the gate too, wasn't there? They'll be wanting to close presently.'

She turned back and asked the young woman if she had seen him.

'No,' said the cousin's wife, beginning to feel nervous. 'What would Master Bao be doing at *our* house?'

Hearing her say this, Cook Liu began to go again; but Bao-yu, partly because he was afraid of being shut out of the Garden and partly because he feared that the cousin's wife might return to the attack if he remained after the visitors had gone, threw discretion to the winds and, lifting up the door-curtain, came rushing out after them.

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'Mrs Liu! Wait for me! We'll go back together!' Cook Liu was mightily astonished.

'My dear young master! Whatever has brought you to this place?'

Bao-yu sped on ahead without replying.

'Call him back, Ma!' said Fivey. 'Tell him not to be in so much of a hurry. He'll run into someone if he's not careful and they'll find out what he's been up to. There's no need for him to hurry in any case. That person we saw waiting for him will see to it that the gate's kept open for him.'

She and her mother ran after Bao-yu to try and catch up with him. The cousin's wife stared after them disconsolately:

her beautiful young gentleman had got away.

Bao-yu did not stop running until he was inside the Garden gate. Only then did he feel safe again, though his heart was still beating wildly. Fortunately no one appeared to have noticed his absence, and when he got back to **Green** Delights he managed to put Aroma off by saying that he had been visiting Aunt Xue.

Shortly after this, as she was making up his bed, Aroma asked him how they should sleep.

'Oh, anyhow,' said Bao-yu. 'I don't mind.'

It should be explained that during the year or two that had elapsed since her unofficial promotion by Lady Wang, Aroma had been taking herself very seriously and no longer, either at night or when they were alone together in the daytime, permitted herself those affectionate intimacies that had been customary between her and Bao-yu in the past. A slight distance seemed to have grown up between them since their younger, more carefree days. Partly it was being so much busier that kept her from him: for although the most important matters remained outside her control, it was she who organized the sewing and other maid's-work, took care of Bao-yu's and the junior maids' pocket-money for them, attended to their clothing and other equipment, and assumed responsibility for the general maintenance of the apartment. Partly it was because she had a fear of infecting him: for she still continued, though very infrequently, to cough blood.

It was mainly for this last reason that she had for some time

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now ceased sleeping in the same room. But Bao-yu was nervous at night and liked to have someone near at hand whom he could call to when he woke up. Because she knew that Sky-bright was a light sleeper, Aroma entrusted all the night-time duties, like answering him when he called, getting up and making tea for him and so forth, to her, so that it had long since been the custom for Skybright to sleep in the same room with him beside his bed. Now that Skybright was no longer with him, Aroma made her own bed up beside Bao-yu's in Skybright's place.

Observing the somewhat dazed manner in which Bao-yu was conducting himself that evening, Aroma urged him to go to bed early, and as soon as she had got him settled, went to bed herself. But he seemed very restless. As she lay in her own bed she could hear him sighing and muttering to himself in his. This went on

until well after midnight. Only then did he fall silent and appeared to have gone to sleep. Relieved, Aroma began drifting off herself. But only for a moment. Before she had a chance to get fully off to sleep, she heard him call out:

'Skybright!'

'What is it?' said Aroma, instantly alert again Bao-yu said that he wanted some tea, so she got up and poured him out a cup. He sighed as she handed it to him.

'I'm so used to calling her, I forgot that it was you.' Aroma laughed.

'The first night she slept with you, you were calling out in your sleep for me. It took you a while *then* to get used to the change.'

They both lay down again. Again Bao-yu was restless and continued so for the space of about two hours. It must have been four o'clock before he finally got to sleep. Just as he was dropping off, Skybright walked into the room looking exactly as she used to do before she was ill. She came right up to the bed and spoke to him.

'Enjoy your lives, all of you! Mine is already over.'

Immediately she had said that, she turned round and walked out again. Bao-yu called out after her. His calling awoke Aroma, who assumed that he was once more calling Sky-

bright's name instead of her own from force of habit. But when she went over to ask him what he wanted, she saw that he was crying.

'Skybright's dead,' he said.

Aroma laughed.

'Don't be ridiculous! Whatever would anyone think if they heard you say such a thing?'

Nevertheless Bao-yu insisted that Skybright was dead and waited impatiently for the daylight when he could send someone to find out the circumstances of her death. But daylight brought a little maid knocking at the front corner gate of the Garden with a message from Lady Wang.

'You must tell Bao-yu to getup immediately and come over to Her Ladyship's as soon as he is washed and dressed. The Master is invited out to a chrysanthemum-viewing, and because he was so pleased with the poem Bao-yu made at the party the other night, he wants to take hi and the other young masters with him. Have you got that message? Be as quick as you can, please. And tell him to hurry. The Master is in the main room with Her Ladyship. They are waiting for Bao-yu to come so that they can start their breakfast. Master Huan is there already, so be quick. And s6meone take the same message to Master Lan, please.'

'Yes, yes,' said the women, hurriedly buttoning up their clothing, and two of them hurried off to deliver it, one to **Green** Delights and the other to Sweet-rice Village.

Aroma knew that something unusual must be toward for someone to be knocking so early at the courtyard gate and called to one of the old women to go and find out what it was while she herself got up and put her clothes on. When she heard the message, she sent someone out for washing-water and roused up Bao-yu. She told him to wash himself as quickly as possible while she went to fetch him some clothes. Since it was Jia Zheng he was going out with, she chose his second best, judging his best to be too showy.

As there was now obviously no possibility of following out his original intention, Bao-yu washed and dressed and hurried over to his parents' apartment immediately. When he got there be found Jia Zheng already sipping his wheatmeal tea and

apparently in very good humour. Bao-yu made his morning salutation to his parents after which he in turn was greeted by Jia Huan and Jia Lan. Jia Zheng ordered the three of them to sit down and drink their wheatmeal tea.

‘Bao-yu is not as diligent as you two in his schoolwork,’ he told the two younger boys, ‘but he is much better than you at making up poems and couplets. No doubt all three of you will be called upon to contribute poems at this place we are going to. Bao-yu will have to help you out a bit.’

This was music indeed in the ears of Lady Wang, who had never before heard her husband praise Bao-yu in such terms. She waited until Jia Zheng and the boys had gone before getting up to make her morning call on Grandmother Jia; but before she could get away, Parfumee’s foster-mother and two of the other foster-mothers came in saying that there was something they wished to speak to her about.

‘Ever since Your Ladyship was good enough to let me take Parfumee home with me,’ said Parfumee’s foster-mother, ‘she’s been refusing to eat and drink and behaving like a crazy girl, and now Nenuphar and Etamine are the same. The three of them have been carrying on something dreadful, threatening to kill themselves and I don’t know what. All they want, they say, is to shave their hair off and become nuns. Well, I thought, they’re only children; after a day or two they’ll get over this. But not a bit of it: two days have gone by already and they’re worse than ever. Neither words nor blows have an effect on them. We’re all at our wits’ end. We’ve come to ask Your Ladyship if you will either let them have their way and go into a convent or else deal with them as you see fit and hand them over to somebody else, because *we* can do nothing with them.’

‘Nonsense!’ said Lady Wang impatiently. ‘It’s not for them to decide what is to become of them. The Buddhist vocation is not to be undertaken on a mere childish caprice. Give each of them a flogging and see if they misbehave then!’

It was the custom for nuns from the various temples which the Jia ladies patronized to visit the mansion over the MidAutumn festival bringing the first-fruits of their offerings. Euergesia, the prioress of Water-moon Priory, who had come

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along with the rest, had been invited to stay on for a few days and happened to be at hand during this interview. This holy old fraud pricked her ears up when she heard of three young persons wanting to become nuns. A few young novices to wait on her and help about the priory were just what she was looking for. She set to work on Lady Wang accordingly.

‘No doubt it is because this is such a blessed household (thanks to all Your Ladyship’s good works) that these young people’s hearts have been turned towards the faith,’ she said. ‘It is true that the Buddha’s gate is not to be entered lightly; but it is also written that the Buddha’s truth is for all sorts and conditions of men. And not only men, for when the Blessed Lord made his vow, it was to work for the salvation of all sentient beings. These three young people have no parents and are far from the place where they were born. Having had a taste of luxury during their years here with you, yet being born to a lowly fate and trained in a profession that at best is vanity, they cannot but tremble when they think what the future may hold for them. I believe that is why, out of the midst of this sea of suffering, they have turned towards the light and resolved to abjure the world and its vanities and prepare themselves for the life to come. That is a noble decision, Your Ladyship. I don’t think you ought to stand in the way of it.’

Lady Wang was a good woman at heart and had only opposed the young actresses’ determination to become nuns because she thought it proceeded from mere childish waywardness and feared that when put to the test they would find the vows of celibacy and abstinence too much for them and fall into mortal sin. But what the old nun said sounded plausible; and besides, she was at this moment very much preoccupied with other matters. Lady Xing had sent someone over to say that she wanted Ying-chun to spend a few days with her so that she could be exhibited to the representatives of a family seeking her in marriage, and Lady Wang herself was facing a visit from an official match-maker who was coming to discuss the matrimonial prospects of

Tan-chun. She was far too worried by these other matters to be unduly

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concerned about the fate of a few entertainers. The answer she gave Euergesia, therefore, was a favourable one.

'Very well then. Would you be prepared to take them as your disciples?'

'Now blessings be upon you!' said the old prioress. 'It would be a holy thing if you would let me, it would indeed. Praise his Holy Name!'

She pressed her palms together and bowed down almost to the ground.

Lady Wang turned to the three foster-mothers:

'All right, go and ask them. If they are really serious about this, they can kotow to Mother Euergesia in my presence and formally make themselves her disciples.'

The three women went off and presently reappeared, bringing the three girls with them. Lady Wang questioned each of them closely about her decision and when she was satisfied that they were utterly resolved to go through with it, allowed them to make their kotows to the old nun. After that they kotowed to her. Now that she was convinced of their determination and saw that nothing could deflect them from it, she began to feel quite sorry for them and ordered the servants to get out various things to give them. She also gave several presents to the prioress.

Thus Parfumee, Nenuphar and Etamine left the sinful world behind them and went off with Euergesia to embark on a new life at Water-moon Priory.

What followed thereafter will be related in the following chapter.

CHAPTER 78

Jia Zheng commissions the Ballad
of the Winsome Colonel
And Bao-yu composes an Invocation
to the Hibiscus Spirit

After the departure of Euergesia and the three girls, Lady Wang was at last able to make her morning call on Grandmother *Jia*. Finding the old lady in excellent humour, she decided that this was as good a time as any to report on her recent activities.

'There is a girl in Bao-yu's room called Skybright,' she said. 'She is already of age; she has been constantly ill during the past year; she gives much more trouble than any of the others; and she is lazy. During her latest spell of sickness, which must have been going on now for the better part of a fortnight, we've had her looked at by the doctor and he says she's got some kind of consumption - a kind that is quite common, apparently, in unmarried girls; so I've sent her back to her own people and told them that we shan't be wanting her here again if she gets better, they can find a husband for her themselves. I also took it upon myself to send away those young actresses. For one thing, like most people trained in that profession, they use the most appalling language I don't think it's very nice for the other girls to be exposed to it. And for another thing, as we no longer require them to perform for us, which is what they were trained for, I think it is only right that we should let them go. We have far too many maids as it is. If Bao-yu or the girls need any more, we can supply them from the regular staff; they don't need young actresses to wait on them.'

Grandmother Jia nodded.

'That sounds quite sensible. I had been thinking along those lines myself. About Skybright, though: I always thought she

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was an excellent maid: she expressed herself well; she was much the best needlewoman I ever had; I had been thinking of eventually giving her to Bao-yu to keep. I'm sorry to hear she has changed so much for the worse.'

'I'm sure you were not mistaken in her,' said Lady Wang, smiling. 'Let's just say that the girl was not destined to be fortunate -.hence this perpetual sickness. "For a growing girl there are eighteen hazards" the proverb says. Quite apart from that, I think these very gifted people are apt to play up a bit, as I am sure you, Mother, with all your rich experience must have noticed. Three years ago I, too, was thinking about choosing someone permanent for Bao-yu, and to begin with I, too, thought of Skybright as the likeliest choice. But after watching her very carefully, I came to the conclusion that, although better qualified than the others in so many particulars, she is not really a very dependable person. For all-round dependability I think Aroma is very much her superior. I know they say "a wife for virtue and a concubine for beauty", but even in choosing a concubine I think the girl with a considerate nature and a sense of responsibility is to be preferred. Aroma may not be as good-looking as Skybright, but in other respects I should rate her qualifications as a chamber-wife very highly. Her behaviour is so mature, and yet at the same time she is such a simple, good-natured girl. During all the years that she has been with Bao-yu she has never once mis-behaved herself; in fact, whenever Bao-yu gets into one of his wild or silly moods, she does her best to talk him out of it. I waited two whole years to see if she was really as good as I thought she was, and when, at the end of all that time, I had found no fault in her, I made a private arrangement to have her maid's allowance stopped and two taels paid to her each month out of my own allowance. Aroma herself was the only person I told about this, because I thought she could do with the encouragement. I deliberately kept it from everyone else, partly because if Sir Zheng had got to hear about it he would almost certainly have said that Bao-yu was too young for a chamber-wife and that having one would distract him from his studies, and partly because if Bao-yu himself thought of her as a chamber-wife, he would be less inclined to listen to

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her good advice and would become more ungovernable than ever. That is the reason, Mother, why I haven't told *you* about this before.'

'I see,' said Grandmother Jia, smiling. 'Oh well, that's all right then. Even better. Aroma never had much to say for herself, in my recollection. I always thought her rather a dull little stick. However, you obviously know her much better than I do. I'm sure you can't be wrong. I certainly think it very wise of you not to have told Bao-yu himself about this, and I hope all of us here will continue to keep quiet about it. I am sure you are right in thinking that he is the sort of person who, when he is married, will never listen to a wife's or a concubine's advice. He's a strange boy. I don't really understand him. I've certainly never known another one like him. His other kinds of naughtiness I can understand; it's this passion for spending all his time with maids that I find so hard to make out. It used at one time to worry me: I thought it must be because he had reached puberty and was having experiences with them; but after watching him very carefully, I came to the conclusion that it wasn't that at all. It's very, very strange. Perhaps he was a maid himself in some past life. Perhaps he ought to have been a girl.'

Lady Wang and the others laughed. Lady Wang then went on to tell Grandmother Jia how highly Jia Zheng had spoken of Bao-yu that morning and how he had taken Bao-yu and the other two boys with him on an outing. Grandmother Jia was delighted.

Not long after this Ying-chun appeared, dressed in her going-out clothes, to take leave of Grandmother Jia and Lady Wang before going next-door to stay with Lady Xing. Xi-feng called in, too, for her morning duty call and

stayed to wait on the old lady while she took her lunch and to joke with her for a while after it was finished. When the old lady had settled herself down for her after-lunch nap, Lady Wang called to Xi-feng to accompany her back to her own apartment. She asked her whether she had started taking the ginseng pills yet. No, not yet, Xi-feng told her, because she was still taking the infusions; but her aunt was not to worry, because she was now feeling completely better. Observing that she certainly

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seemed to have got her old cheerfulness back, her aunt was inclined to believe her. She told her about her dismissal of Skybright and the other girls. This led her to another topic.

'Why did your Cousin Chai go back home without telling anyone? Doesn't *anyone* know? When I was making my inspection yesterday, I decided to take a look at Wan's servants as well. That new nurse she has got for little Lan is quite unsuitable; in fact, I don't like the look of her at all. I said to Wan, "I don't care how you do it, my dear, but you must get rid of that woman at once. Lan is old enough to do without a nurse now in any case. He certainly doesn't need a nurse like that one!" I asked her if she knew about Bao-chai. She said yes, Bao-chai had told her that she was going, but it was only for two or three days, until her mother was better, and then she would be moving in again. Well I know for a fact that there is nothing much wrong with your aunt: a bit of a cough and some back-ache, but then she always gets that at this time of year. I am sure there is some other reason for her leaving. Can anyone have offended her? She is such a serious child. I should hate to think of anyone offending her after our two families have been getting on so well together all these years.'

'Who could possibly have offended her?' said Xi-feng, smiling.

'I wondered if Bao-yu might have done,' said Lady Wang. 'He is so careless about what he says, so tactless. When he gets excited he is capable of saying almost anything.'

'I don't think you have much to worry about on *that* account,' said Xi-feng. 'Bao-yu may behave foolishly in company, but when he is with our girls, or even the maids, he is always extremely considerate. His greatest anxiety is always how *not* to offend them. He is certainly the last person I should expect to hear any of our girls complain about. I should think Cousin Chai's leaving has much more to do with that search we carried out in the Garden the other night. She would naturally infer from it that the people in the Garden are not trusted; and since she knew we would never search *her* people because of her position here as our guest, she might well conclude that the only way in which she could dear them

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of suspicion would be to move outside. I'm sure that's why she went: to avoid suspicion.'

To Lady Wang, too, this seemed the most likely explanation. She studied the floor thoughtfully for some moments; then she had Bao-chai summoned, explained to her what had happened, and assured her that she must not think herself under the least suspicion. She must move back into the Garden at once and continue living there as before.

Bao-chai smiled courteously but held her ground.

'I had been meaning to move out some time ago, Aunt, but did not like to mention it to you because I knew you were so much occupied with other matters. It was the coincidence of Mamma's being poorly and her two most reliable maids both going sick at the same time which decided me to move out when I did. Now that you know about my leaving, I should like to ask formally for permission to move out my things.'

Lady Wang and Xi-feng both laughed.

'You are too unbending,' said Lady Wang. 'Do, please, move in again. Do not allow a trifle like this to come between us.'

Bao-chai smiled.

'I assure you, Aunt, you are quite mistaken. It really isn't because of what you think that I am leaving the Garden. It is because Mamma has been in rather low spirits lately and there's no one but me for her to rely on during the night. And besides, Pan is getting married shortly, and there is still a lot of sewing to do and household things to get. Mamma badly needs to have me at hand all the time to help her with the preparations. You know how things are in my family, so you know that I am not making this up. And there is another reason. Ever since I first moved into the Garden, the little south-east corner gate has been left open. This was done specially for our convenience, but of course there is nothing to prevent anyone else using it who wants to take a short cut. No one going through it is ever questioned. Now suppose the wrong person got in by that way and something awful happened. It would make it very awkward for all of us. When I first moved into the Garden it didn't matter much one way or the other if I spent the nights there. We were all very much

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younger then and there wasn't so much that needed doing at home. It seemed better for me to be sewing or playing in the Garden with the other girls than moping at home on my own. But now we are older it is rather different. I am sure that the worries you have had during this past year or two have been aggravated by the fact that the Garden is too big to keep all the time under your surveillance. Any reduction in the number of people living there means some reduction in the number of your worries. That is why I am not only determined to move permanently out of the Garden myself, Aunt, but would seriously urge you to make whatever other reduction in numbers may be necessary. You mustn't think that for a great household like yours to retrench would be undignified. Look how modestly *we* live nowadays. It was a very different style we used to live in when I was a little girl.'

It was unusual for Bao-chai to speak at such length. When she had finished, Xi-feng turned with an amused expression to Lady Wang.

'I think you will have to let her have her way, Aunt. You can't force her to move in if she doesn't want to.'

Lady Wang nodded.

'I find what you say unanswerable,' she told Bao-chai. 'You will have to do as you think best.'

While she was speaking, Bao-yu came in to report that he was back.

'Father is still at the party,' he said. 'He told us to come back now because he was afraid it might be going on much longer and he didn't want us coming back in the dark.'

'I hope you didn't disgrace yourself,' said Lady Wang anxiously.

'Not in the least,' said Bao-yu. 'Look at all the loot we've brought back!'

The old women from the inner gate who, as he entered, had relieved his pages of the things they had been carrying, now came forward with them for Lady Wang to inspect. There were three fans, three fan-pendants, three boxes of writing-brushes, three boxes of ink-sticks, three rosaries and three jade belt-buckles: one of everything for each of the three boys.

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'The fans and fan-pendants are from Academician Mei,' said Bao-yu, 'the ink-sticks and brushes are from Vice-President Yang, and the rosaries and buckles are from Under-Secretary Li.' He fished Out a little sandalwood Buddha-charm from inside his jacket. 'This is from the Duke of Qing-guo. He only gave one to me.'

Lady Wang questioned him about the other people who had been present and the poems that had been composed. She told someone to take Bao-yu's share of the presents and go with him and the other two boys to see Grandmother Jia. Grandmother Jia was of course delighted, and Bao-yu found himself having to answer all the

same questions over again. His anxiety to learn about Skybright made him anxious to get away, and after answering a few of them, he told his grandmother that he had been riding rather fast and was aching all over from his ride.

'You must go back to your room at once then and change into more comfortable clothes,' she said. 'You'll feel better when you've had a chance to relax; but don't, whatever you do, lie down.'

Bao-yu left his grandmother's without more ado. Musk and Ripple, with two of the junior maids from **Green** Delights, were waiting for him outside. Ripple took charge of his share of the presents and she and the other two trotted along after him as he strode into the Garden.

'Phew! I'm hot,' he said, divesting himself of hat, belt and outer garment as he walked along and handing them to Musk to carry. He was wearing a gown of lined damask underneath, whose viridian **green** contrasted strikingly with the flashes of blood-red trouser revealed through the side-slits as he walked along. Ripple recognized the trousers as Skybright's handiwork.

'"Objects remind us",' she said, quoting from the well-known proverb. Musk nudged her reprovingly and tried to change the subject.

'Yes,' she said lightly, 'the **red** of the trousers goes very well with the dark **green** of the gown. What with them and his **blue**-black boots and his **green**y-black hair and his snow-white face he makes quite a picture!'

Bao-yu, walking slightly ahead of them, pretended not to

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have heard; but after going only a few steps further, he halted abruptly.

'Oh dear, I have to pay a little call!' he said. 'What am I going to do?'

'That's all right,' said Musk. 'We're not going to lose you in broad daylight!'

She told the two junior maids to go with him.

'Ripple and I will come back for you when we've got rid of these.'

'Can't you wait?' said Bao-yu. 'I shan't be a moment.'

'Oh, do let us get rid of these things first!' said Musk. 'Whatever must we look like, traipsing after you with all this stuff? Like the Wardrobe Master and the Clerk of the Ink-horn in a royal procession!'

Bao-yu, who had been hoping that they would go, indicated that they might do so and went off with the two junior maids to a secluded corner behind some rocks where he could question them.

'Did Aroma send anyone to Skybright's place after I had gone?'

'Yes, she sent Mamma Song,' said one of the girls.

'What did Mamma Song say when she got back?'

'They told her that Skybright was lying with her head back calling out all night long, but in the early morning she stopped calling and closed her eyes. They said it looked as if she was going.'

'Who was she calling for?' Bao-yu asked hurriedly.

'Her mother,' said the girl. 'They said she just went on calling "Mamma!" "Mamma!" all night long.'

'Didn't she call for anyone else?' said Bao-yu, brushing away a tear.

'They didn't mention anyone else,' said the girl.

'Oh, you're a silly girl!' said Bao-yu impatiently. 'I'm sure you must have misheard.'

'She certainly *is* a silly girl,' the other little maid piped up. A sharp little creature, she had sensed at once what Bao-yu was hoping for and was willing to supply it. 'T not only heard exactly what Mrs Song said; I even managed to slip out and see Skybright myself.'

'How did you come to do that?' Bao-yu asked her.

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‘Remembering how much kinder than any of the other senior maids Skybright had always been to me,’ said the girl, ‘I thought to myself that though I couldn’t do anything else for her in her trouble, I could at least go to visit her. Even if someone saw me and reported me to Her Ladyship and I got a beating, it would be worth it after all she had done for me. So, at the risk of a beating, I stole round to her cousin’s place to see her. Although she was so near death, her mind was quite unaltered. She held my hand and opened her eyes wide when she saw me. “Where’s Bao-yu gone?” she said. When I told her, she sighed. “Oh,” she said, “I shan’t be able to see him, then.” “Can’t you hold out a bit?” I asked her. She smiled at me. “No,” she said. “You see, I’m not really dying; I’m going to heaven to be a flower-spirit. The Jade Emperor has given me the job of looking after the flowers.” She said, “I have to leave at half-past two to take up the job, and Bao-yu won’t be home until a quarter to three, so we shall miss seeing each other by only a quarter of an hour. Usually when people are dying, King Yama sends his demons to fetch their souls, and if you want to delay a bit, all you have to do is burn a bit of spirit money and make a little offering of some rice and tea, and they will leave you alone for a few minutes while they go after the money and stuff. But when the heavenly messengers summon you, it’s different. You can’t keep *them* waiting for a single moment.” At the time I didn’t quite believe her, but when I got back I kept my eye on the clock and sure enough it was exactly a quarter to three, as she’d said it would be, when they told us you’d got back and we were to go over and wait for you.’

‘You can’t read,’ said Bao-yu, ‘so you wouldn’t know about these things. But there are in fact flower-spirits: I’ve read about them. Not only is there a spirit in charge of all the flowers, but there are also lesser spirits in charge of each separate kind of flower. I wonder which Skybright is going to be.’

The little maid quickly glanced round the Garden for inspiration. Her eye lit on some hibiscus bushes which, this being now the second half of autumn, were already in full bloom.

‘I asked her myself,’ she said. “‘Tell me what kind of

flower you are going to be responsible for,” I said, “so that after you are gone we shall know where and when to make you offerings.” “I’ll tell you,” she said, “but you mustn’t let anyone else but Bao-yu know about it. These are immortal matters which are supposed to be kept secret.” Then she told me: the hibiscus flower.’

Bao-yu found nothing extraordinary in this. On the contrary, after hearing it, his sorrow turned instantly into delight. He looked round and smiled happily as his eyes rested on the hibiscus bushes.

‘Such a flower is worthy to be looked after by such a person!’ he said. ‘I felt sure that someone of her qualities would have work to do in the world. But -’ he became sad once more as he reflected - ‘although *her* sufferings are over, it still means that I shall never see her again.’

Then it occurred to him that, though he had failed to be with her at the end, there was nothing to stop him going to see her now and paying his last respects to her body. After the five or six years she had been with him and all that she had done for him in that time, he surely owed it to her. He hurried back to carry out this resolve, running into Musk and Ripple on his way. They had just started out again to look for him.

Back at **Green** Delights he hurriedly dressed up again and, telling the girls that he was going to pay a call on Dai-yu, slipped out of the Garden and made his way, on his own this time, to the place where he had visited Skybright the day before, expecting to find her laid out there in her coffi 1.

Skybright had died not, as the lying maid had said, that afternoon, but early in the morning. As soon as she had breathed her last, the cousin and his wife had gone to the mansion to tell Lady Wang in the hope of getting some money out of her for the funeral. Lady Wang had given them ten taels and told them to get the body out of the house as quickly as possible and have it cremated.

‘The girl died of a consumption,’ she said. ‘You mustn’t keep the body in the house, whatever you do.’

Impressed by this advice, they had hurried off with the money and made arrangements to have the body

encoffined

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and carried to the burning ground outside the city without delay. Skybright's clothes and jewellery, worth between three and four hundred taels, they kept for themselves: a nice little sum to put by for their old age. When all the arrangements had been completed, they shut up the house and accompanied the hearse outside the city to see the body cremated. Bao-yu arrived, therefore, to find the house locked up and nobody at home. Once more frustrated, he stood for some minutes gazing blankly at the door. Finally, since there was nothing else he could do, he turned round and walked back to the Garden. The thought of returning to his room was distasteful to him. He decided to call in at Dai-yu's on the way back; but Dai-yu's maids told him that their mistress was out.
'She's gone to see Miss Bao,' they said.

Bao-ya made his way to All-spice Court. To his surprise he found it silent and deserted, and when he peeped inside, he could see that it had the empty, cheerless look of an uninhabited house. He had a vague recollection of having heard some days previously that Bao-chai was thinking of moving out; but he had been so busy with homework during the past few days that it had gone out of his mind. Now it appeared that she really had moved.
A sort of blankness came over him. Chess had gone. Picture had gone. Parfumee and the other four little actresses had gone. Skybright was dead. Now, it seemed, Bao-hai and her lot had gone, too. And though Ying-chun was supposed to have left only temporarily, to judge from the number of visits made by match-makers during the past weeks, it would riot be very long before she was getting married. The Garden's little society was breaking up.
'Oh well,' he thought, 'no good fretting about it now. I'll go and enjoy Dai-yu's company for a while; and after that, I've still got Aroma to go back to. It looks as if we three will soon be the only ones left.'
In that philosophical frame of mind he went back to the Naiad's House; but Dai-yu had still not returned. Just as he was wondering where else he could go, a maid from Lady Wang's apartment came up to him with a message from his mother.

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'The Master's back now and wants to see you. He says he's got a good subject for a poem and you are to come at once.'
Bao-yu was obliged to accompany the girl to his mother's apartment; but by the time he got there, his father had already gone. Lady Wang ordered some of her women to accompany him to his father's study outside. He found Jia

Zheng discussing the highlights of the chrysanthemum-viewing party with his literary gentlemen.
‘Shortly before the gathering broke up,’ he was telling them, ‘there was some discussion about an episode from the history of the last dynasty. It was a story in which the romantic, the edifying, the heroic and the pathetic were all exemplified - indeed, one of the most remarkable stories I have ever heard. Everyone present agreed that it deserved a poem to commemorate it.’
‘Pray tell us the story,’ said the literary gentlemen, intrigued.
‘It seems that there was a member of the Imperial clan called Prince Heng,’ Jia Zheng began, ‘who had gone out to become Military Governor of Qing-zhou. As well as being a fanatically keen soldier, the Prince was inordinately fond of female company, and in the free time left over from his official duties, found a way of combining these two interests by recruiting a large number of beautiful young women whom he had trained in military arts. Every day these young women would be made to engage in mock combat and other warlike exercises for the Prince’s entertainment. The most beautiful and also the most militarily accomplished of these young women was a certain Miss Lin, who, because she was the fourth daughter in her family, was known by the name of “Fourth Sister Lin”. Prince Heng thought so highly of her that he gave her a colonelcy and put her in command of the whole female troop. From then on he took to calling her “Colonel Winsome” or “the Winsome Colonel”.’
‘How priceless!’ exclaimed the literary gentlemen rapturously. “‘The *Winsome* Colonel”! What a marvellous combination! Surely this Prince Heng must have been one of the most eccentrically romantic persons the world has known?’

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‘One could certainly call him that,’ said Jia Zheng. ‘But there is stranger still to follow.’
‘Stranger still?’ said the literary gentlemen with surprise. ‘Then this must be a very strange tale indeed.’
‘In the second year of his governorship,’ said Jia Zheng, ‘a horde of bandits, latter-day descendants of the **Yellow** Turbans and **Red** Eyebrows of the Han period, swept over the whole of Shantung Province, looting and pillaging as they went. The Prince, scorning to mobilize fully against an enemy whom he regarded as a mere rabblement of sheep

and curs, took the field against them himself at the head of only a light force of cavalry. But the rebel leadership, by an unexpected combination of cunning and low trickery, defeated him in two successive engagements. In the second of these the Prince himself died fighting.

'In Qing-zhou the civil and military authorities were in a panic.

"'What could you or I hope to do when the Prince himself has failed?" they asked each other, and began to make plans for yielding up the city to the rebels.

'But Fourth Sister Lin's reaction to the grim news was to gather her fellow-officers together and address them as follows:

"'Our beloved Prince's goodness to us was such that we could never have repaid even a small fraction of it as long as we lived. Now that he has laid down his life for his country, I feel that we in turn ought to lay our lives down for him. Those who feel as I do, follow me. Those who do not are free to leave now, while there is time."

"'We will follow you!" the girls cried with a single voice; and that night, under the cover of darkness, they rode out from the walls of Qing-zhou into the midst of the rebel camp. At first, because the rebels were unprepared, they succeeded in killing and decapitating several of their leaders; but it was not long before those in the camp realized that the raiders were a party of women who could easily be overcome if offered determined resistance. Seizing their weapons and rallying themselves together, they fell upon Fourth Sister Lin and her band with such ferocity that soon the girls' heroic

vow to die for their Prince was fulfilled, for not a single one of them was left alive.

'The Emperor and the entire Court were deeply affected when news of this was brought to them. It is to be assumed that a suitable person was then appointed to command operations against the rebels and that the rebel horde melted away at the first appearance of the Imperial forces - we are not concerned with that. But what of Fourth Sister Lin, gentlemen? Do you not find her an admirable person?'

'Admirable indeed!' said the literary gentlemen. 'And what a marvellous subject for a poem! We must all of us try to make one up about her.'

One of their number took a writing-brush and inkstone and wrote down the story almost exactly as Jia Zheng had told it,

slightly modifying it here and there in the interest of style, to serve as a short preface for their poem. When he had finished it, he handed it to Jia Zheng for his approval.

'Yes, that seems to me exactly as it should be,' said Jia Zheng after glancing briefly through it. 'It was a preface rather like this one that started off the discussion at our gathering. An Imperial directive was received at the Department yesterday asking for a search to be made in the records of this and the preceding dynasty for hitherto neglected instances of outstanding merit deserving some posthumous recognition. No class of persons was to be excluded: monks, nuns, beggars, women and girls - all were eligible. Wherever exceptional merit could be established, a brief account of it was to be forwarded to the Board of Rites for inclusion in the list of recommendations. The preface they were discussing at our gathering was a copy of the account sent in by our Department to the Board. It was reading that preface that gave those present the idea that they should write a "Winsome Colonel" poem in commemoration of Fourth Sister Lin's heroic loyalty.'

'And very right that they should I' said the literary gentlemen smilingly. 'But what is most admirable of all about this story is the tireless benevolence of the present Court which led to the unearthing of this forgotten heroism. Surely this is a thing unparalleled in any former age? The Tang poet's line

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This holy age, when nothing good's omitted,

might almost have been written in anticipation of the present reign.'

'Indeed!' Jia Zheng nodded gravely.

By this time Jia Huan and Jia Lan had also arrived. Jia Zheng allowed the three boys to look at the preface and then told them that he wanted a poem from each one of them. He would award a prize to whoever completed one first and another prize for the best poem.

Jia Huan and Jia Lan had several times recently been called upon to compose in company and so were not unduly nervous on this occasion. After reading the preface, all three boys went off into separate corners to think. Jia Lan was the first to finish a poem and Jia Huan, fearful of being outstripped by his young nephew, made haste to follow. The two of them had already written their poems out while Bao-yu was still thinking. Jia Zheng and the literary

gentlemen decided to look first at what the two younger boys had written. Jia Lan's contribution was in the form of a quatrain.

Fourth Sister Lin was the Winsome Colonel's name:
She was beautiful and gentle, yet her valour none could tame.
In Qing-zhou where, her Prince to avenge, she threw her life away,
The very ground on which she fell is fragrant to this day.

The literary gentlemen praised the little poem enthusiastically.
'For a young boy of his years to produce such a poem is proof of a highly cultured upbringing,' they said.
'Childish prattle! Childish prattle!' Jia Zheng laughed deprecatingly. 'Still, for one of his tender years it is quite a creditable effort.'

Next they read Jia Huan's contribution. It was a Regulated Verse poem in pentameters.

The lovely lady would not sit and grieve;
For sterner thoughts her warlike breast did fill.
She dried her woman's tears and fearless rode
Through Qing-zhou's gates to be killed and to kill.
'However great the odds,' she said, 'I can 'My debt repay, if not avenge this ill.'

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The inscription graved upon her tomb shall be:
'Here buried lies the world's fidelity.'

'Ah yes!' said the literary gentlemen. 'What a difference those few years between them make! This is quite a different approach.'
'I suppose it's not too bad,' said Jia Zheng, 'but it doesn't really do justice to the subject.'
'Oh well, as to *that* -!' said the literary gentlemen. 'After all, our young friend is not so *very* much older than his nephew. Old heads are not to be expected on young shoulders! Give them a few more years and I don't doubt we shall have a pair of poets in our midst to rival Ruan Ji and his nephew Ruan Xian!'
'Come, come, they are not as good as that!' said Jia Zheng, smiling. 'They don't study hard enough, that's their trouble.'

He asked Bao-yu how he was getting on.
'After all this careful chiselling, Mr Bao's poem is sure to be something of quite a different order from these two we have just heard,' said the literary gentlemen' - one, no doubt, in which the romantic and tragic aspects of the theme will both be fully exploited.'
Bao-yu smiled.
'I don't think Regulated Verse is quite the right medium for

this subject. It calls for something longer - a song or ballad in the Old Style - to do it justice.'

'You see!' said the literary gentlemen, some jumping to their feet, some nodding or clapping in their enthusiasm. 'We said that his contribution would be quite different! It is the sign of a good, experienced writer to be able to gauge immediately what form will be most appropriate to the subject. With a title like this *and* a preface, clearly what is called for is either a long narrative poem like Bo Ju-yi's "The Everlasting Remorse" or an Old Style ode like Wen Ting-yun's "On Hearing Guo Dao-yuan Play the Musical Glasses" or Li He's "Return from Gui-ji", in which narrative and lyrical elements combine. Only the greater freedom of the Old Style allows for the smoother, more flowing development that this subject calls for.'

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Jia Zheng was of the same opinion. He took brush and paper and prepared to write.

'So be it, then. Recite your lines, my boy, and I shall take them down for you. They had better be good after this boastfill preliminary, or I shall beat your bottom!'

Bao-yu recited his first line:

Prince Heng was fond of a pretty face and of martial arts also- Jia Zheng copied the words down and then shook his head over what he had written.

'Vulgar and pedestrian!'

'No, no, it isn't vulgar,' said one of the literary gentlemen. 'That is what the Ballad Style is like. Wait and see how it goes on.'

'All right, we'll let it pass,' said Jia Zheng. Bao-yu continued.

So he trained the ladies of his court to ride and draw the bow. In ravishing songs and beguiling dances the Prince took no delight,
But to watch the pike-drill he was fain of fair maids in a row.

He waited while Jia Zheng finished writing down the lines. The literary gentlemen professed themselves particularly impressed by the 'ravishing songs' line, claiming to see a quality of 'rugged strength' in it which they deemed highly appropriate in a ballad. The fourth line, which they called 'pure narrative', was also, they thought, exactly as it should be.

'You shouldn't praise the boy so,' said Jia Zheng. 'You will turn his head. Let's see how he manages to develop this in his second stanza.'

Bao-yu recited:

As he watched them drill, he scarcely saw the clouds of dust arise;
'Twas the lovely Colonel's lamplit face that swam before his eyes.

'Bravo!' shouted the literary gentlemen. "'He scarcely saw the clouds of dust" leads us on to the "lamplit face" of the heroine. A most ingenious development! The way every word is used in these two lines is quite masterful!'

Bao-yu continued:

When the rosy lips framed their harsh commands he could smell the mouth's sweet breath;
But the weapons oft shook in the fair white hands, too weak for such exercise.

The literary gentlemen laughed and clapped their hands. 'What a wonderful picture! I think friend Bao must have been among those present at the time. He saw the white hand shake and smelt the perfume. How else could he describe it all so vividly?'

Bao-yu laughed.

'Women drilling, however bold and fierce they might be, could never look quite the same as men. One can assume the occasional softness creeping in without having had any special experience.'

'Oh, get on!' said Jia Zheng. 'We can do without the comment.'

Bao-yu thought a little before beginning the next stanza.

The lotus belt round the Colonel's waist in a clove-shaped knot was tied –

'The change of rhyme from "eyes" to "eyed" is one example of that smooth, flowing development we were just now talking about,' said the literary gentlemen. 'Also, this line has just that touch of charm and prettiness that the subject calls for.'

'I don't agree,' said Jia Zheng. 'I don't like this line at all. We have already heard about her "mouth's sweet breath" and her "fair white hand" in the last stanza. Why does he need to go on in this strain? I think it is mere weakness of invention that leads to this piling up of descriptive bric-a-brac.'

'A long ballad *needs* a few ornamental, descriptive passages,' said Bao-yu, 'otherwise it would seem too bare.'

'You are continuing the same kind of description into a new stanza,' said Jia Zheng. 'When are you going to get on to her warlike side? If you have another two or three lines of this kind of stuff, it's going to seem like drawing legs on a snake!'

'All right,' said Bao-yu. 'I'll try to make a quick change to the warlike side and then finish the whole description off in this one stanza.'

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'What a genius!' said Jia Zheng sarcastically. 'You begin with a line that looks like the first item in a long catalogue, and now you are talking about instant changes and abrupt conclusions. I think you may find that you have bitten off rather more than you can chew!'

Bao-yu hung his head and pondered a while before finally coming out with this line:

Yet it was not strung pearls that hung from it) but the good sword at her side.

'Will that do?' he asked anxiously.

The literary gentlemen banged on the table and cheered.

'We'll leave it,' said Jia Zheng. 'Carry on.'

'If it will do, I'll continue as I've planned,' said Bao-yu. 'If not, it would be better to cross it out and I'll try to think of something completely different and develop in another direction.'

Jia Zheng shouted at him angrily.

'Hold your tongue, sir! Do it again if it's not good enough, indeed! How many times do you propose to go on trying? Ten times? A hundred? Save your energy and get on!'

Bao-yu resigned himself to developing from the line he had just recited. He thought for some moments before continning.

When late at night the jousting ended, her courage was quite spent,
And her handkerchief with carmine sweat from her streaming face was dyed.

'That's the end of another stanza,' said Jia Zheng. 'Now

how are you going on?'

Bao-yu continued:

Next year the whole North-east land with rebels was a-run,

Like ravening beasts, or swarming bees after the queen has flown –

' "A-run" is good,' said the literary gentlemen. 'It is little touches like that that show the master-hand at work. The narrative style in this stanza is good, too. Lively.'

Bao-yu continued:

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The Prince led forth the Emperor's men the rebel hordes to quell.
He fought them once and he fought them twice, but his army was overthrown.
A stench of blood upon the wind blighted the standing corn, And on empty tents and an empty camp the setting sun went down.

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'Twas the rainy time, and sounding rills down the lone **green** hillsides sped
When Prince Heng, his fighting ended, on the battlefield lay dead.
Now rain has washed the white bones clean, but not the blood-soaked grass,
And as the moon rises, shivering ghosts stand at each corpse's head.

'Brilliant!' cried the literary gentlemen. 'The narrative style, the imagery, the choice of words are all quite perfect. But now what about Fourth Sister Lin? What ingenious new development will bring her back upon the scene?'

Bao-yu recited:

The officers refused to fight for fear they might be killed,
And with no defenders, Qing-zhou's fate seemed already to be sealed.
But though the men were all afraid, the girls were loyal and true:
And among them Prince Heng's favourite with especial zeal was filled.

'Neatly turned!' said the literary gentlemen.
'It took four lines to do it, though,' said Jia Zheng. 'Too much! And I expect there is more useless verbiage to follow.'

Bao-yu continued:

Now who the Prince's favourite was to you shall be revealed:
Fourth Sister Lin she was by name, the Winsome Colonel called.
She rallied her companions fair and issued a command,
And like a troop of lovely flowers they rode into the field.

Their heavy saddle-cloths are wet with tears of the spring sky's woe,
And the iron of their armour chills them, as through the cold night they go.

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Though the outcome may be uncertain; they have taken a solemn vow,
Whate'er befall, before they die, for the Prince to strike a blow.

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But what chance against their savage foe had that gallant band?
Like gentle flowers they perished, crushed by a brutal hand.
The horses' hooves are fragrant yet that trod them in the mud;
Near the city walls their poor ghosts flit, where they made their final stand.

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A courier riding through the night to the Emperor's city came, And all who heard his heavy news with sadness did exclaim.
The Son of Heaven looked aghast when he learned of Qing-zhou's fall,
And his captains and his counsellors all hung their heads for shame.

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The captains and the counsellors and men of high degree
Were put to shame by Fourth Sister Lin's fidelity.
For Fourth Sister Lin my heart with grief doth swell,
And though my song is ended now, my thoughts on her still dwell.

The literary gentlemen broke into loud acclaim as Bao-yu finished. It seemed at first as if they might go on indefinitely. Subsiding at last, they read the whole poem through *again* from the beginning.

'It is certainly a very *long* poem,' said Jia Zheng, smiling, 'but for all that, I don't think it really does justice to the subject.'

He turned to the three boys:

'All right, off you go!'

The three of them went off, feeling like condemned prisoners who have suddenly been given a reprieve. For the two younger ones it was the end of their day: a blessed nothingness until bedtime. But Bao-yu was still grieving for Skybright. The sight of the hibiscus by the lake reminded him of what the little maid had told him about her. As he stood gazing sorrowfully at the bushes, an idea suddenly came to him.

'Since I wasn't able to see her in her coffin, why don't I pay my last respects to her here, in the presence of her flowers?'

He was on the point of kneeling down in front of them when another thought occurred to him.

'That's all very well, but I can't do it just anyhow. In order to show proper respect I must first make sure that I am dressed correctly. And I must prepare a little ceremony and make her some sort of offering.'

This led to further cogitation.

'It says somewhere in the classics, "Where there is faith enough and goodwill, duckweed boiled in puddle-water is an offering acceptable to the gods and a dish fit to be set before princes." Proper respect evidently has nothing to do with the value of the offering. And I could always write something to read out before I made it.'

He began to plan what he would write. 'An elegy' it would be called. It would be a bit like one of those long Chu poems - *Li sao* or *The Summons of the Soul*- but with elements of other things as well. And of course a lot of it would be original. He sat down and began writing it as soon as he got back to his apartment. As it was to please himself, he could be as wild and extravagant as he liked and compose as quickly as his imagination would let him. Soon the draft was finished, and he took a piece of white material of the kind they call 'mermaid silk', which he knew Skybright had been fond of, and after first writing the title on it in large characters:

THE SPIRIT OF THE HIBISCUS:
AN ELEGY AND INVOCATION

he copied out the text in a neat *kai-shu* hand and carried it with him into the Garden. The little maid who had told him about Skybright's transformation had to follow him with some things for the offering on a tray: a cup of tea, some autumn flowers in a vase of water, and some charcoal in a little burner for starting a fire with. When his solemn bowings and kneelings were over, he hung the silk up on the branches of a hibiscus and began tearfully to read out the words:

The year being one in the era of Immutable Peace, the month that in which the Sweet odours of hibiscus and cassia compete, the day, a heavy and doleful day, I, most wretched and disconsolate JADE of the House of **Green** Delights,

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having with due reverence prepared and got together buds of flowers, silk of mermaids, water of the Drenched Blossoms stream and Fung Loo tea (all things of little value in themselves, yet sufficient to attest the devotion of a true believer) do here offer them up in sacrifice to her that has now, m the Palace of the White God) become SPIRIT OF THE HIBISCUS, having power and dominion over the flowers of autumn.

It is now Sixteen years since the BLEST SPIRIT descended into the world of men. As to her native place and the lineage in which she was born, they were long since forgotten; but for five years and eight months of that time she was, in my rising up and lying down, in my washings and combings, in my rest and play, my constant dose companion and helpmate.

It is to be recorded of her that in estimation she was more precious than gold or jade, in nature more pure than ice or snow, in wit more brilliant than the sun or stars, in complexion more beautiful than the moon or than flowers. Who of the maidens did not admire her accomplishments? Who among the matrons did not marvel at her sagacity?

But if baleful scritch-owls that hate the heights can cause the kingly eagle to be taken in a net, and rank and stinking weeds, envious of another's fragrance, can cause the sweet herb of grace to be uprooted, it is not to be thought that a shrinking flower could withstand the whirlwind's blast, or a tender willow-tree be proof against the buffetings of the tempest. When the envenomed tongue of slander was wagged against her, she pined inwardly with a wasting sickness: the **red** of her cherry lips faded and only sad and plaintive sounds issued out of them; the bloom of her apricot cheeks withered and none but lean and haggard looks were to be seen upon them.

Slanders and slights crept from behind every curtain; thorns and thistles choked up the doors and windows of her chamber. Yet truly she had done no infamous thing. She entered a silent victim into the eternal, a wronged innocent into the everlasting: a more notable martyr (though but a mere girl) to the envy of excellence than he who was drowned at Long Sands; a more pitiable sufferer from the peril of plain dealing than he that was slain upon Feather Mountain.

Yet since she stored up her bitterness in silence, none

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recognized the treasure that was lost in her, cut off so young. The fair cloud dispersed, leaving no means to trace the beauteous outline of its former shape. It were a hard thing to hunt out the Isle of the Blest from among the multitudinous islands of the ocean and bring back the immortal herb that should restore her: the raft is lost that went to look for it.

It was but yesterday that I painted those delicate smoke black eyebrows; and who is there today to warm the cold jade rings for her fingers? The medicine she drank stands yet upon the stove; the tears are still wet on the garment she once wore. The phoenix has flown and MU S K'S vanity-box has burst apart for sorrow; the dragon has departed, and RIPPLE'S comb has broken its teeth for grief. The magpie has forsaken my chamber: it is in vain for the maidens to hang up their needles on Seventh Night and pray for nimble fingers. My buckle with the love-ducks is broken: the seamstress is no more who could repair the silk-work of its girdle.

And this being the season of autumn when the power of metal predominates and the White God is master of the earth, the signs themselves are melancholy. I wake from dreams of her on a lonely couch and in an empty room. As the moon veils herself behind the trees of the garden, the moonlight and the sweet form I dreamed of are in the same moment extinguished; as the perfume fades from the hangings of my bedchamber, the laboured breath and whispered words I strove to catch at the same time fail silent. Dew pearls the pavement's moss; the launderer's beat is borne in unceasingly through my casement. Rain wets the wall-fig; a flute's complaint carries uncertainly from a near-by courtyard.

Her sweet name is not extinguished, for the parrot in his cage under the eaves ceases not to repeat it; and the crabtree in my courtyard whose half-withering was a foretokening of her fate stands yet her memorial. But no more shall the sound of her lotus feet betray her at hide-and-seek behind the screen; no more will her fingers cull budding orchids for the game of match-my-flower in the garden. The embroidery silks are thrown aside in a tangle: never again will she cut them with her silver scissors. The sheeny silk lies creased and crumpled: never again shall her hot-iron smooth out its perfumed folds.

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In her last hour, when I might else have gone to her, I was called in haste from the Garden by a Father's summons; when, grieving, I sought to take leave of her abandoned body, I could not see it because it had been removed by a Mother's command; and when I was told that her corpse had been consumed, I repented of my jesting vow that we should share the same grave-hole together, for that were now impossible, and that our ashes should commingle, for ash she is already become.

In the burning-ground by the old temple, **green** ghost-fires flicker when the west wind blows. On its derelict mounds, scattered bones gleam whitely in the setting sun. The wind sighs in the tall trees and rustles in the dried-up grasses below. Gibbons call sadly from tombs that are hidden in the mist, and ghosts flit weeping down the alley-ways between the tombs. At such times must the young man in his crimson-curtained bed seem most

cruelly afflicted; at such times must the maiden beneath the **yellow** earth seem most cruelly ill-fated.
The tears of Ru-nan fall in bloody drops upon the wind, and the complaint of Golden Valley is made to the moon in silence. Vengeance is for demons and baleful bogles; the gentle spirits of maidens are not wont to be jealous, though wronged. Natheless shall the backbiters not lightly escape her; their mouths shall be squeezed in vices; the hearts of those cruel harridans shall he ripped: for her anger is kindled against them.

Though the bond between us was a slight one, yet can it not easily he broken; and because she was ever close to me in my thoughts, I could not forbear to make earnest inquiry concerning her. Thus it was revealed to me that the God had sent down the banner of his authority and summoned her to his Palace of Flowers, to the end that she who in life was like a flower should in death have dominion over the hibiscus. At first when I heard the words of the little maid touching this appointment, I thought them fantastical; but now that I have pondered them in my heart, I know them to be worthy of perfect credence. How so?

Did not Ye Fa-shan compel Li Yong's sleeping spirit to compose an epitaph? And was not the soul of Li He summoned in order that he might write a memorial in heaven? The circumstances may differ, but the principle is the same. God chooses his ministers according to their

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capabilities, else how could they discharge the duties that are required of them? And who more fit and meet than her to be given this charge that has been laid upon her? Truly, here at last she has a work that is worthy of her.

And because I would have her descend here in this place, I have composed these verses to invoke her with, fearing that the common speech of mortals might be offensive to her immortal ear.

The Invocation

All's clearest azure above * where her team of white wyverns through the welkin wends,
And the world in a haze below * as her chryselephantine car to the earth descends.
Her awning's relucent splendour * outshines Antares and his starry band,
Her guidons and gonfalons go before * and the stars of Aquarius guard her on either hand.
Cloudcleaver follows as escort * Moondriver gallops to clear the way ahead.
I can hear the creak and trundle of chariot-wheels * of her phoenix-figured car's majestic tread.
I can smell the enveloping perfume * of her cincture from fragrant stalks of asarum twined,
See the dazzle of her dress * gleaming with moon-jade ouches, fretted and lined.
I'll strew the altar with lily-of-the-valley leaves * and have waterlilies for lamps fed with orchid oil,
And in chalices cunningly fashioned from calabash * pour rarest metheglin flavoured with penny-royal.
As I fasten my gaze on the clouds * methinks I see a faint glimmer of her face;
As I strain my ear on the silence * I seem to hear a faint echo of her voice.
But she, on a tryst with eternity, brooking no coarctation * has abandoned me, cruel, here in the dust to be,
Calling on Windlord in vain to drive me up after her * to ride side by side with her across the sky.
My heart is all wracked with teen * yet it boots not to weep and wail:

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You are gone now to your long sleep * against Nature's order no power on earth can prevail.
In the grave-vault secure you rest * the bourne after which there is no more transformation.
But to me still in bonds in this hateful wen below * O Spirit, succouring come for my consolation!

O Spirit, come and abide for my consolation!

But what though she is present in this place? She is girt about with silence; she is veiled in a mist of invisibility; I cannot see her:

Only the **green** wreathed creepers that make her side-screens,
And the ranks of tall bullrushes, her guardsmen's spears.
The sleepy willow-buds waken as she approaches;
And the bitter lotus-seeds sweeten as she nears.
The White Virgin waits for her on cliffs of cassia;

From Orchid Island the water-sprite comes to greet her.
Jade-player plays for her on a little organ,
And Cold-keys sweeps the iron spine with his metal beater.
The God of the Mid Peak's consort comes at her bidding;
The crone of Li Mountain is summoned forth to meet her.
The Luo River turtle brings her his magic offering;
To the heavenly music wild beasts gambol and prance.
In the deeps of **Red** River the dragons are humming the melody;
And in pearl-tree groves the Birds of Paradise dance.

Seeing my reverence and my devoutness of heart (notwithstanding that I have neither vessels of gold nor vessels of bronze in which to make my offering) she drove forth her chariot from the City of Sunrise to meet me; but even now her banners are returning to the Garden of Night. For a little moment it seemed that the invisible would become visible; but murky vapours rose up suddenly between us and we were cut off.

Clouds and mists drifted and drew together,
Rain and fog veiled the heaven's light;
Then rolling back, revealed the high stars
And earth all radiant in the noon of night.

My mind is in a turmoil, uncertain whether I wake or dream. I gaze at the sky with sighs of disappointmnent; I wait in

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uncertainty with weeping eyes. My speech grows silent: only the music of the wind in the grove of bamboos is to be beard, and the wing-beats of birds as they fly off startled, and the plopping sounds of fish as they nibble at the surface of the water.
Blest Spirit, may my lament go up to thee; may my rite be acceptable to thee.
Wuhu aizai! Receive this offering!

When he had finished reading, he made a little flame with the burner and set fire to the silk. Then he poured the tea out on the ground as a libation, scattered the flowers, and emptied the water out of the vase. He continued to linger there after he had finished, as though unable to tear himself away, and the little maid had to remind him several times that they ought to be getting back. He had just started to go when a laughing voice called out Stop a minute!' and the maid, turning to look behind her, saw with terror that a female form was stepping out of the bushes.
'Help! she cried. 'It's a ghost! Skybright's spirit really has come back!'
Bao-yu looked back too. But whether or not it was a ghost he saw will be revealed in the following chapter.

CHAPTER 79

Xue Pan finds to his sorrow that he is
married to a termagant
And Ying-chun's parents betroth her
to a Zhong-shan wolf

At the end of the last chapter our story had reached a point at which, just as Bao-yu and the little maid were beginning to walk away after completing the sacrifice to Skybright, they were startled by the sound of a human

voice coming from the direction of the flowering hibiscus bushes. When Bao-yu looked, he saw that the person who had called out was Dai-yu. She advanced towards him smiling.
'A highly original elegy! It deserves to have a permanent place in literature alongside the *Elegy for the Shaman's Daughter* by Han-dan Chun!'
Bao-yu blushed and laughed sheepishly.
'Most elegies one sees are so stale and derivative, I thought I'd try my hand at writing something a bit different. It was only for my own amusement; I hadn't intended that anyone else should hear it. Perhaps now that you *have* heard it, you will let me know of any glaring errors you may have noticed and help me to correct them.'
'Where is the original text?' said Dai-yu. 'I should need to have a careful look at the text first before venturing on any criticism. It was such a long piece, I could barely make out what most of it was about. There were a couple of lines somewhere near the middle that caught my attention:

> The young man in his crimson-curtained bed must seem most cruelly afflicted;
> And the maiden beneath the **yellow** earth must seem most cruelly ill-fated.

The general sentiment is all right, but I thought "crimson-

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curtained bed" a trifle shop-worn. I don't see why you used that image when there is a much better one to hand.'
'Oh, what's that?' said Bao-yu.
'We've all got this rose-coloured haze diaphene in our windows,' said Dai-yu. 'Instead of "the young man in his crimson-curtained bed", why not say 'the young man at his rosy-misted casement"?'
Bao-yu stamped his foot and laughed delightedly.
'Excellent! How clever of you to have thought of it! It only goes to show that there is always something to hand if only one will take the trouble to look. Stupid people like me fail to think of the obvious. Actually though, I *haven't* got that sort of gauze in my windows; so though "rosy-misted casement" is a great improvement, I don't think I had better use it. It would be fine for *you* to use it, but I think if *I* did it would be a bit presumptuous.'
'But why?' said Dai-yu, smiling. 'My window is your window. It is unfriendly to be so punctilious. Look at the ancients who used to "lend furs and horses and feel no resentment when they came back the worse for wear". And that was to mere acquaintances: *we* two are members of the same family.'
'I agree with you that one ought to share with one's friends,' said Bao-yu, 'and not only furs and horses, but even more precious things if one has them. But for a mere male to arrogate to himself what properly belongs to you girls would be quite a different matter. It would be better to alter "young man" and "maiden" and let it be *your* elegy. After all, you were always very well-disposed towards Skybright. I'd rather give the elegy to someone else than throw away your "rosy-misted casement". Let's make it:

> The mistress by her rosy-misted casement must seem most cruelly afflicted;
> And the maid beneath the **yellow** earth must seem most cruelly ill-fated.

I should be very happy to alter it in that way, even though it would mean that the elegy would cease to have anything to do with me.'

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'She wasn't *my* maid,' said Dai-yu. 'It doesn't make sense. Besides, "mistress" and "maid" are such an unpoetical combination. I might want to use this version when Nightingale is dead, but that won't be for a long while yet, I imagine.'
'Come now, it's not very nice to talk about Nightingale dying,' said Bao-yu, laughing.
'You started it,' said Dai-yu.
'I know what,' said Bao-yu. 'I've got a still better solution. Why don't we just say:

I by my rosy-misted casement seem most cruelly afflicted;
And you beneath the **yellow** earth seem most cruelly ill-fated?

Dai-yu momentarily changed colour; yet though the words filled her with an almost unbearable feeling of premonitory dread, she masked it with a smile and nodded approvingly at his suggestion.
'Yes, that's a great improvement. Better not tamper with the words any more or you will spoil them. You ought in any case to be getting back now. I'm sure you must have more important things to attend to. When I saw your mother just now, she was briefing someone to tell you that you are to go to your Aunt Xing's place first thing tomorrow morning. It seems that your Cousin Ying's betrothal has been decided on. I expect they want you there for the ceremony.'
'What's the hurry?' said Bao-yu, a trifle pettishly. 'I've not been feeling particularly well lately. I may not be

well enough to go there tomorrow.'
'How typical!' said Dai-yu. 'I should try to grow out of these childish ways if I were you. You are getting too old-'
She broke off in a fit of coughing. Bao-yu at once became concerned about her.
'There's a nasty wind here. I don't know why we are standing around in the cold like this. We'd better be getting back now. There's no sense in making ourselves ill.'
'I ought to be going back now in any case,' said Dai-yu. 'It's time I went to bed. We'll see each other again tomorrow.'
She began to walk away. Bao-yu began gloomily walking off in the opposite direction. Suddenly it occurred to him that

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Dai-yu was unaccompanied and he told the little maid to run after her and see her back to her apartment.
Back at **Green** Delights he found some old women with a message from his mother. It was as Dai-yu had said. He was to go over first thing next morning to his Uncle She's house.

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The family that Jia She was proposing to marry his daughter into was called Sun. They were a Da-tong family whose menfolk had all, for several generations, been Army officers. A former head of the family had placed himself under the patronage of the Ning and Rong brothers, so their claim to a special relationship with the Jia family was a strong One. Only one member of the family was at present living in the capital, a young man called Sun Shao-zu who had been given the post of Military Provost in the metropolitan garrison as an hereditary entitlement. He was a tall, powerfully-built, impressive-looking young man; he drew a good bow, had a good seat on a horse, and knew how to bear himself well in company and please those whom it was important to please. Still under thirty and with his family's not inconsiderable wealth behind him, he had excellent prospects. Already the War Department had marked him out for promotion. And he was unmarried. From every point of view - the special relationship between their two houses, the Sun family's wealth, and the personality of the young man himself - Jia She regarded this as being the almost perfect match and informed Grandmother Jia of his choice. Grandmother Jia by no means shared his enthusiasm; however, after reflecting that the couplings of young people are to a large extent fated and that, as Jia She was after all the girl's father, it was not really for her to interfere, she made some neutral response such as 'I see' or 'Oh, are you?' and left it at that.
Jia Zheng felt a much more positive antipathy to the match. He detested the Suns. Though the connection between the two families was a long-standing one, it had come about because Sun Shao-zu's grandfather, who had been the worst possible sort of social climber, had wormed his way into the patronage of Jia Zheng's grandfather and great-uncle for the

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sole purpose of concluding some dubious business that he could not have brought off on his own. In Jia Zheng's view they lacked both education and breeding. He spoke to Jia She on two separate occasions advising him very strongly against the match; but as Jia She refused to take the slightest bit of notice, there was nothing much he could do.
Bao-yu had never met Sun Shao-zu before. Obliged to do so at his uncle's place next day and to make such small-talk as he was capable of, he was appalled, in the course of conversation, to discover just how soon the marriage was to be: it seemed that Ying-chun would be going to her husband's house before the end of that year.
When some time later Lady Ying came over to tell Grandmother Jia that she now wanted to move Ying-chun out of the Garden for good, he became even more depressed. That strange apathy they had observed in him on previous occasions again came over him. The news that Ying-chun would be taking four maids with her to the Sun household provoked some stamping and groans and the remark that 'five more decent people were now lost to the world'; but it was only a momentary outburst.
He took to wandering about for hours on end in the neighbourhood of Amaryllis Eyot, now shuttered and forlorn and with only one or two women of the night-watch on duty in it. The very reeds and knotgrass along its banks and the caltrops and pondweed in the water seemed to have taken on a wilting, dejected look, as if they too were missing the presence of their former tenant. All the charm and colour which had once endeared the spot to him seemed now to have abandoned it. So strong was this feeling, that it eventually began forming itself into a poem, the words of which came almost unbidden to his lips.

The pool's **pink**-petalled lotus crowns have gone,
By one night's nipping wind of autumn blown;
Like stricken mourners, knotgrass and caltrop-heads
Under the weight of frost and dew bow down;
And the board whose Go-stones clicked the long day through
With mud of sluttish swallows is blotched brown.

Old poets for parted friends made such a din:
What grief must mine be then for closest kin?

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Just as he had finished reciting this poem, Bao-yu heard a laugh behind him.
'What are you mooning about for *this* time?'
Bao-yu glanced back and saw that it was Caltrop. He turned to greet her.
'My dear Caltrop! What brings *you* here today? You are becoming quite a stranger in this Garden.'
Caltrop clapped her hands as if she found his question a great joke.
'I am always longing to come here,' she said, 'but now that your Cousin Pan is home again, I am no longer a free agent. Just now Mrs Xue was trying to get hold of Mrs Lian and they told her that she was in the Garden. I asked for the job of going to look for her simply as an excuse for coming here. I have just seen Mrs Lian's maid and she told me that her mistress is with Mrs Zhu in Sweet-rice Village. I'm on my way there now. Tell me, how is Aroma these days? And how was it that Skybright died so suddenly? What was wrong with her? And Miss Ying - she moved out very suddenly, didn't she? Just look at this place, it already looks deserted!'
Bao-yu did his best to answer her. He also invited her to accompany him back to **Green** Delights and have some tea there.
'I can't at the moment,' said Caltrop. 'Wait till I've seen Mrs Lian and given her my message and I'll come and see you then.'
'What's this important message that you are in such a hurry to give her?' said Bao-yu.
'It has to do with your Cousin Pan getting married.'
'I see,' said Bao-yu. 'Who did they finally settle on? They seemed to be wrangling about it for months. It seemed to be Miss Zhang one day, Miss Li the next, and the day after that Miss Wang. One wondered what the unfortunate girls had done to deserve being considered for such a fate.'
'Well you can forget about them now,' said Caltrop, 'because it's all been settled.'
'What family does the one they've chosen belong to?' said Bao-yu.
'A family that was related to our family by marriage once

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before,' said Caltrop. 'Your Cousin Pan called in on them last year during his travels. They are Imperial Purveyors like us, registered with the Ministry of Finance, and one of the wealthiest families in the capital. All your folk here seemed to have heard of them when we told them. In fact everyone in the city, from Imperial Princes to shopkeepers, has heard of the Cassia Xias.'
'Oh,' said Bao-yu. 'Why do they call them that?'
'They are, as I say, very, very rich,' said Caltrop, 'and they own a great deal of land. Several hundred acres of their land are devoted just to growing cassia alone. All the cassia sold in shops in the city is supplied by them, and all the cassia, both cut flowers and potted plants, on display in the Palace. That's how they got the nickname. Old Mr Xia that used to be head of the business is dead now. There's only his widow left and a young Miss Xia. No son. It's sad to think that the family may die out.'
'Spare your sorrow,' Said Bao-yu. 'What about this young lady? Why did Mr Xue take a fancy to her?'
'Partly I suppose it was because they were destined for each other and partly it was a case of "beauty in the eye of the beholder",' said Caltrop smiling. 'Years ago when they were little and their two families were often visiting each other, your cousin and Miss Xia used to play together and call each other's parents "Auntie" and "Uncle". When your cousin went to call on them last year, Mrs Xia, having no son of her own and seeing him now for the first time as a grown-up man, felt more as if she was welcoming a long-lost son. She was quite overcome, laughing and crying by turns; and of course she insisted that he and her daughter should see each other. Well it seems that the daughter has grown into a great beauty, and is educated, too, having been taught by a private tutor. Your cousin was quite bowled over. Mrs Xia even had the older men from the shop who were travelling with your cousin to stay with her. They must have spent three or four days in her house. She'd like to have kept them even longer and they had quite a job persuading her that they needed to be getting back. When they did get back, your cousin could speak of nothing else. Almost as soon as he'd set foot in the door he was telling

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Mrs Xue that she must get him the young lady for his wife. Mrs Xue was quite agreeable. She'd seen Miss Xia when she was a little girl, and she knew the families were well-matched. So after talking it over with Her Ladyship and Mrs Lian, she sent someone to see Mrs Xia about the betr6thal and it was settled almost immediately. The only snag is, they've fixed the date for the wedding a bit on the early side, which means a terrible rush to get ready. Still, I'm longing for her to be here. Think of it: another person to write poetry with!'
'Hmn, maybe,' said Bao-yu. 'All the same, I am a bit worried for you.'
'What do you mean?' said Caltrop. 'I'm afraid I don't understand you.'
'I should have thought it was obvious enough,' said Bao- yu. 'Isn't there a fear that if somebody else appears on the scene Cousin Pan will lose interest in you?'

Caltrop's face reddened and she stared back at him coldly.
'What sort of talk is that? I used to think that we respected each other, you and I. Now I am beginning to understand what people mean when they say that you are the kind of person with whom it is impossible to be friendly.'
She turned on her heel and walked away, giving him no chance to reply.
A sense of desolation came over Bao-yu. It was as if a part of him had been irretrievably lost. For some minutes he stood vacantly staring after her, like an idiot. Returning at last in great dejection to **Green** Delights, he shortly afterwards went to bed. But he did not sleep well that night. Several times in the course of it he called out Skybright's name in his sleep or woke up in terror from some frightful dream. His body next morning was feverish and he seemed to have lost all appetite for food and drink.
The events of the past few weeks - the raid on the Garden, Chess's dismissal, Ying-chun's departure, Skybright's death and all the attendant humiliation, shock and grief had been too much for him. They now combined with the effects of the chill he had taken in his recent loiterings in the autumnal Garden to lay him on his back for several weeks. Grandmother Jia came over daily to Gteen Delights to visit him

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and Lady Wang began to regret that her concern about Skybright had caused her to deal with him so harshly. However, she gave no outward indication of this change of heart beyond renewing her orders to the womenservants to take special care of him. Twice every day the doctor called to take his pulses and. supervise his dosing. It was a whole month before he began to show signs of improvement, and even then the doctor insisted that. he would require a hundred days of convalescence before he could return to a normal diet or be allowed to set foot outside his courtyard.

The restraints of this period of convalescence, during which all his amusements had to be taken inside his own room, soon proved extremely irksome. By the time forty or fifty of the hundred days had gone by, he was already fairly exploding with impatience; but all his pleading and all the ruses he adopted to get the sentence altered were in vain. Both Grandmother Jia and Lady Wang were adamant. Resigned at last to another fifty days of confinement, he concentrated his energies on thinking up ever more ingenious and outrageous ways in which he and his maids could pass the time.

News reached him in his confinement of the superb plays and banquets with which Xue Pan celebrated the arrival of his new bride. Everyone said she was good-looking, and not only that, but literate and able to write a tolerable hand. Bao-yu would have given anything to go over and meet her; but of course he could not.

Not long after that came news of Ying-chun's wedding, and Bao-yu realized with a pang that the affectionate, brother-and-sister-like relationship of their childhood years was now at an end: from now on, even if they ever met, they would have to be formal and distant with each other. It made him doubly despondent when he reflected that he had not even been able to see her before she left. However, he decided to keep his troubles to himself. For the time being he continued to concentrate on thinking up new ways of passing the time. At least there was one good thing about his confinement: he no longer had Jia Zheng urging him and threatening him about his studies. During those hundred days of convalescence he and the maids all but took **Green** Delights apart. No form of

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diversion was too wild or hare-brained for him to try, and things were done then that cannot have been thought of before or since. We will not tax the reader's credulity by attempting to describe them.

After delivering her snub for what she mistakenly believed to be a deliberate rudeness, Caltrop decided that in future it would be best to keep away from Bao-yu as much as possible, even to the extent of avoiding visits to the Garden altogether. This was not difficult, since she was at the time fully occupied with preparations for Xue Pan's wedding.

Caltrop had persuaded herself that when there was another woman in the house - someone who would take a share of the responsibilities and whose authority she herself could fall back on - life would be somehow easier for her than it was at present. The young lady Xue Pan was marrying was said to be not only beautiful but educated; it followed, in Caltrop's reasoning, that she must be gentle and ladylike as well. Caltrop awaited her arrival even more impatiently than Xue Pan, and resolved to serve her, when she came, with all the devotion and care of which she was capable.

The young lady of whom Caltrop entertained such high expectations was still only seventeen. It is true that she was not at all bad-looking; she could even read quite a number of words; and if subtle deviousness of character had been an examinable qualification, she might have come out a good second to Xi-feng. Her chief drawback sprang from the fact that she had lost her father at a very early age; and as her widowed mother had no other child of her own and doted on her excessively, she had been thoroughly spoiled. By treating her every whim as law and gainsaying her nothing, her mother had turned her into a monster. In her own estimation Miss Xia was a bodhisattva; all other creatures were as dust beneath her feet. The exterior she presented to the world made one think of the flowers in spring; underneath it there were lightnings and tornadoes. At home, in the bosom of the family, her maids learned to gauge the severity of her tantrums: if she was only slightly vexed, she would curse them; if she was

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gravely displeased, they would be beaten. As for her views on matrimony: Miss Xia - or Xia Jin-gui to give her her full name - considered that if she wanted to be mistress in her own house, it behoved her to put her maidenly modesty and the gentleness that was habitual with her aside and show a little authority. It would be necessary to keep the others in their place. Xue Pan in particular, because of his wilfulness and intransigence, must be broken in as quickly as possible, or she would never be able to establish her dominion and plant her flag in this new territory. The discovery that there was a beautiful and intelligent young concubine in this household she was entering aroused feelings in her akin to those expressed by the founder of the Song dynasty when he likened the world to a bedroom and declared that none but he should snore in it.

Because of her name ‘Jin-gui’, which means ‘cassia’ and the abundance of cassia-trees cultivated by her family, Xia Jin-gui had always insisted on strict avoidance of the syllables ‘jin’ and ‘gui’ and the word ‘cassia’ by her maids and any other inferiors who had to do with her. Of course, cassiaflowers had from time to time to be referred to somehow or other, so, bearing in mind the myth about the cassia-tree that grows beside the palace of Chang E in the moon, she decreed that cassia should always be referred to in her presence as ‘Chang E’s flower’. The notion that in doing this she was in some way conferring on herself the status of a moon-goddess was perhaps not entirely absent from her mind. At all events, the luckless maid who carelessly let out a ‘jin’ or a ‘gui’ in her presence or who was incautious enough to utter the dread word ‘cassia’ was in for a savage beating and would probably lose her pay for a month or two as well.

Now Xue Pan was one of those fickle natures always ready to be ‘off with the old love and on with the new’; and in spite of all his bluster, he was only pot-valiant, having little stamina, or stomach either, for a long-drawn-out trial of strength. While the novelty of his marriage still lasted, he was, in any case, only too willing to defer in everything to his beautiful young bride. Jin-gui quickly grasped what sort of person she had to deal with and exploited her advantage to

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the utmost. During the first month of their marriage things stood about equally between them, but by the end of the second month Jin-gui’s star was definitely in the ascendant.

One day, after drinking rather more than was good for him, Xue Pan went to see Jin-gui about something he wanted them both to do. On meeting with determined opposition to his proposal, he finally lost patience with her and, after some angry shouting, walked out on her in a temper. Jin-gui wept abandonedly, refused to eat or drink, and eventually succeeded in persuading everyone that she was ill. A doctor was summoned who pronounced her to be suffering from a ‘collision of blood and air’ and prescribed a lenitive medicine to ease the clogged passages of the breath.

Aunt Xue gave Xue Pan a furious dressing-down.

‘You’re a married man now and soon you’ll be a father. I don’t know how you can carry on like this. Here’s a girl as rare as a phoenix chick, a beautiful, delicate creature, reared up with I don’t know how much loving care by her family -they only let her marry you because they thought you had enough human decency to look after her properly - and what do you do? Instead of making an effort to control yourself and settling down to live in peace and harmony with her as a husband ought to do, you carry on just as you always did, drinking too much and treating the girl like a barbarian. So now we have to spend money on expensive doctor’s bills and put up with this quite unnecessary anxiety, all because of you.’

Xue Pan felt thoroughly remorseful after this lecture and went back to Jin-gui to try and make it up with her. But Jin-gui had heard the lecture too and was encouraged by it to behave even more outrageously than before. Xue Pan’s pacific overtures were ignored. He had to humble himself still further. It took a fortnight of patient wheedling to talk his wife into a more satisfactory frame of mind. By that time the selfassurance that had once

been characteristic of him was very much in abeyance.

Having already, in this first encounter, caused her husband to lower his colours and at the same time discovered that her mother-in-law was harmless, Jin-gui began pressing forwards in quest of yet further victories. At first she would do no more

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than consolidate her ascendancy over Xue Pan; then, using her feminine charms to make him her instrument, she would extend her dominion over Aunt Xue; and finally Bao-chai too should be brought under her control. But Bao-chai saw through her sister-in-law's little game very quickly and was able to meet ruse with ruse - even, by means of an occasional quiet but well-placed remark, to give her ambitions some check. Finding that she was not to be taken with cunning, Jin-gui began looking for occasions for a direct confrontation with her; but as Bao-chai was equally careful not to give her any, she was for the time being obliged, albeit reluctantly, to treat her with respect.

One day, having nothing better to do, Jin-gui engaged Caltrop in conversation. When, in answer to her questions, Caltrop told her that she had no recollection of her home and parents, Jin-gui was displeased. She felt sure that Caltrop knew really but was withholding the information out of malice.

'Who gave you the name "Caltrop"?' she asked her.

'Miss Bao,' said Caltrop.

Jin-gui sneered.

'People are always saying how clever your Miss Bao is. I can't see that she showed much cleverness in choosing you that name.'

'If you say that of Miss Bao,' said Caltrop warmly, 'it must be because you have never had occasion to test her knowledge. Even Sir Zheng has often spoken admiringly of Miss Bao's learning.'

Jin-gui's reaction to that remark will be related in the chapter which follows.

CHAPTER 80

Unfortunate Caltrop is battered by
a philandering husband
And One Plaster Wang prescribes for
an insufferable wife

Jin-gui reacted to Caltrop's defence of Bao-chai's intelligence with a toss of the head, a scornful curl of the lip and a couple of loud, contemptuous sniffs.

'The flowers that girls are named after are supposed to be beautiful, sweet-smelling ones. What is there beautiful or sweet-smelling about a caltrop-flower? If you're going to call caltrop-flowers sweet-smelling, then what are you going to say of the flowers that are really fragrant? It's a ridiculous choice for a name.'

'But caltrop-flowers *are* sweet-smelling,' said Caltrop 'A lot of water-plants are. Even lotus-leaves and lotus-pods have a certain fragrance - not to be compared with the scent of flowers, perhaps; but in very still weather, especially very early in the morning or very late at night, they have a delicious, cool fragrance that is in some ways superior to that of flowers. Even caltrops themselves and cock's heads and the roots and leaves of reed-grass have a lovely fresh scent after dew or rain; it makes you feel good just to smell it;'

'To hear you speak,' said Jin-gui, 'anyone would think that orchid and cassia were not particularly fragrant.'

Caltrop, warming to the argument, momentarily forgot Jin-gui's taboo.

'Ah now, orchid and cassia are quite different,' she began; but before she could get any further, Moonbeam was pointing a finger in her face and crowing over her in malicious triumph:

'You'll catch it now! That's the mistress's name you've just said.'

Caltrop was overcome with confusion and hurriedly apologized for her lapse.

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‘I’m truly sorry, madam. It was a slip of the tongue. I hope you won’t hold it against me.’

Jin-gui smiled magnanimously.

‘Oh, that doesn’t matter. You don’t need to worry about that. About this name of yours, though: I really *don’t* think that “Caltrop” is very appropriate. I should like to change it, but I don’t know whether you would be willing to let me.’

‘Oh, madam, what a thing to say!’ said Caltrop, smiling. ‘I am your chattel, to do with exactly as you wish; who am I to be willing or unwilling? If you wish to change my name, my name already is whatever you wish to change it to!’

Jin-gui smiled, somewhat unpleasantly.

‘*You* may say that, but I fear your Miss Bao may be rather less happy about it.

‘Ah no, madam. You see, when I was bought by the family, I used first to work for Mrs Xue: that’s how Miss Bao came to give me my name, not because I was Miss Bao’s own maid. Then after that I served the master. Miss Bao has nothing to do with me - especially now *you* are here. In any case, she’s a very sensible young lady - not at all the sort of person to make a fuss about a little thing like this.’

‘Very well,’ said Jin-gui: ‘in that case, since a water-lily is a much more appropriate flower to name someone after than a caltrop, I think we ought to call you “Lily”.’

‘Very good, madam, let that be my name then,’ said Caltrop, smiling.

“Lily” she became then from that moment. Bao-chai, when she heard about it, appeared totally unconcerned.

Xue Pan was in some respects like the general of old in whom ‘conquest did but breed appetite for further conquest’, for when, after his marriage to Jin-gui, he discovered that she had an attractive, rather coquettish maid called Moonbeam, he was continually calling to her to bring him things -cups of tea and the like - so as to have an opportunity of flirting with her. Moonbeam perfectly well understood what he was up to but had to behave circumspectly from fear of Jin-gui, whom she studied carefully for some sign which would indicate how she wanted her to respond.

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Jin-gui had indeed noticed Xue Pan’s interest in her maid and reasoned within herself as follows.

‘I’ve been wanting to deal with Caltrop, but so far haven’t found a way of getting at her. Since he’s already taken a fancy to Moonbeam, I might just as well let him have Moonbeam, because he’s sure to grow cooler towards Caltrop as a consequence and I shall be able to take advantage of that in order to get rid of Caltrop; and with Caltrop out of the way, settling Moonbeam’s hash ought to be easy, because Moonbeam is my own servant.’

Having decided on a strategy, she had only to await a suitable opportunity of putting it into practice. Such an opportunity occurred one evening when Xue Pan, having drunk himself into a state of cheerful inebriation, called as was his wont to Moonbeam to bring him some tea. while Moonbeam was handing him the cup, he deliberately gave her fingers a squeeze; Moonbeam, with a very unnatural affectation of modesty, drew back her hand; and since neither of them had their minds on what they were doing, the cup crashed to the floor, splashing hot tea over Moonbeam’s skirt and everything else round about. Xue Pan tried to cover up his embarrassment by pretending that Moonbeam had not handed him the cup properly, while Moonbeam for her part said that the master had not ‘taken a proper hold’.

Jin-gui hooted at them contemptuously.

‘You two really are a comedy! You must think I’m an idiot.’

Xue Pan hung his head and laughed sheepishly and Moonbeam fled blushing from the room when, not long after this, it was time to go to bed, Jin-gui tried to turn Xue Pan out of the bedroom and make him sleep elsewhere. She said she was tired of seeing him go around all the time looking as if he was wasting away with

passion. Xue Pan smiled foolishly and said nothing.

'If you want to do something, why don't you tell me?' she said. 'All this groping in corners will get you nowhere.'

Encouraged by her words and fortified by what he had drunk against any feeling of shame, he knelt down on the bed-covers beside her and seized her hand.

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'Listen, lover,' he said: 'if you will let me have your Moonbeam, I'll give you anything you ask for - anything at all. If it's human brains you want, I shall see that you have them.'

'what nonsense you talk!' said Jin-gui. 'what do I care who you go to bed with? Just don't make a fool of yourself by carrying on in front of the others, that's all I ask.'

Xue Pan was so pleased and grateful that it seemed he would never stop thanking her. That night he performed his conjugal duties with exemplary thoroughness. Every sinew was strained to give Jin-gui pleasure. He did not go out next morning, but hung around at home, waiting for an opportunity of exploiting his new-found licence.

A little after midday Jin-gui rather pointedly went out in order to leave the coast dear. Xue Pan lost no time in setting to work on Moonbeam, who, since she now had a pretty good idea of her mistress's intentions, put up only a token resistance to his advances. Carnal congress seemed imminent. But Jin-gui had been waiting for this moment only in order to frustrate it.

Jin-gui had a maid called Orfie who had been with her in her mother's house since she was a child. Orfie had lost both her patents when she was little and had no one else to look after her, so when she first entered service with the Xias, she was invariably referred to as 'the little orphan'. Her name 'Orfie' was simply a convenient contraction of this. Orfie's duties were normally of a rough and menial kind, but on this occasion she was employed by her mistress on a task requiring some finesse.

'Orfie,' said Jin-gui, 'do you think you could tell Lily to fetch my handkerchief from my room and bring it to me? You needn't let her know that it was I who sent you.'

Orfie went off to look for Caltrop.

'Miss Lily,' she said when she had found her, 'the mistress has left her handkerchief in her room. Why don't you go and get it for her?'

Caltrop had recently been puzzled by Jin-gui's hostility, and, in her efforts to overcome it, was constantly thinking of things that she could do to please her. Since Orfie's suggestion seemed to offer a means of winning favour, she sped off

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without a second thought to do the errand, bursting into the room at the very moment when Xue Pan and Moonbeam were in the interesting situation we have just described. She turned back, blushing to the tips of her ears, but not in tune to escape the notice of the other two.

Xue Pan himself was fairly unconcerned. Jin-gui was the only person he feared, and as Jin-gui had given her consent, he cared nothing about what anyone else might think. He had not even bothered to shut the door. But Moonbeam minded very much. Being by nature a disputatious, somewhat self-righteous young woman, she found it peculiarly galling that Caltrop of all people should have seen her at such a moment. Pushing Xue Pan away from her, she ran out of the room, protesting, with cries of angry complaint, that he had been attempting to rape her.

The effect of this upon Xue Pan was that all the excitement generated by his tussling with Moonbeam was

transformed into animosity against Caltrop. He rushed outside and spat at her.

'Little harlot! What do you man by it, wandering around the place like a damned disembodied ghost?'

He might have done her an injury, but Caltrop, sensing that she was in mortal danger, ran as fast as her legs would carry her and managed to get away. Abandoning the chase, he went back to look for Moonbeam but could find no trace of her. This increased his anger against Caltrop, whom he cursed once more in her absence. After dinner that evening, when he had once again drunk himself merry, he decided to take a bath. On testing the water with his foot and finding it to be too hot, he insisted that Caltrop had done it deliberately, intending to harm him, ran after her, stark naked as he was, and gave her a couple of kicks. Caltrop had long grown unused to such savage treatment; but things had now reached such a pass that she dared not complain and ran off to weep alone and nurse her injuries in silence.

Meanwhile Jin-gui had secretly instructed Moonbeam to place herself at Xue Pan's disposal that very night in Caltrop's bedroom. She ordered Caltrop to move in with *her*, and when she refused, said she supposed that it was because she found

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her room dirty or was too lazy to wait on her at night. She pretended to think that it was Xue Pan who had inspired her refusal.

'That master of yours is such a barbarian,' she said. 'He has only to look at a girl to want her for himself. Now he's taken my maid away, yet he won't let me have you in her place. What's his idea, I wonder? Does he want to drive me to my death?'

Xue Pan, for whose ears this was, of course, intended, became apprehensive that the difficulties Caltrop was making might once more prevent him from enjoying Moonbeam, and he came rushing into Caltrop's room to rebuke her.

'Don't you realize, this is an honour your mistress is doing you? You do as you're told and sleep with her, or I'll give you a beating!'

Caltrop had now no choice but to roll up her bedding and carry it into Jin-gui's room. Jin-gui told her to make her bed up on the floor. This order too she had to obey. As soon as she had settled down for the night, Jin-gui called to her for some tea. Caltrop brought her the tea and lay down again. A little after that Jin-gui called to her to come and massage her legs. And so it went on, seven or eight times in the course of the night, so that it was impossible for Caltrop to get right off to sleep or even to rest properly.

Now that Xue Pan had got Moonbeam, he was like a man who has come into possession of a priceless jewel. He forsook all other interests for her. This secretly enraged Jin-gui, who could not forbear some jealous mutterings when she was on her own.

'Enjoy yourself while you can, my friend,' she would say. 'I shall get round to you in the end. And when I do, you had better not complain!'

For the time being, however, she refrained from outbursts and set about laying a trap for Caltrop. About a fortnight after Caltrop moved into her room she suddenly pretended to be ill. She complained of agonizing pains in the heart and appeared unable to move her limbs. Nothing they did for her seemed to bring relief. The servants said it must have been brought on by something Caltrop had done to upset her.

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A couple of days later, as one of the maids was shaking out Jin-gui's pillow, a cut-out paper mannikin fell out of it. It had the eight symbols of her nativity written on it and five needles sticking into it, one in the heart and one in each of the limbs. This item of news was thought sufficiently interesting to be reported to Aunt Xue, instantly

throwing that poor lady into a highly inflammable state of nervous commotion. The effect the news had upon Xue Pan was even more violent. He was for having all the servants flogged immediately until one of them confessed to having planted the paper figure; but Jin-gui prevented him.

'Why make the innocent suffer?' she said. 'I expect it's Moonbeam who did it, to get me out of the way.'

'That's most unfair,' said Xue Pan. 'When, during this past week or two, has Moonbeam had the *time* to go inside your room?'

'Who else could it have been then?' said Jin-gui. 'I suppose you don't think I'd do it to myself? Moonbeam is the only one who'd dare go in my room.'

'But Lily's been in here with you all the time,' said Xue Pan. *'She* must know, if anyone does. *She's* the one to flog if we want to find out.'

'What's the good of flogging anyone?' said Jin-gui. 'They'll never confess anything. If you ask me, you'd much better pretend you haven't heard about it and let the matter drop. When all's said and done, it doesn't much matter if I die. You can always find yourself a better wife when you feel like it. If we're going to be honest, the fact of the matter is, you all three hate me, don't you ?'

She began crying bitterly. Xue Pan was so enraged that he snatched up a door-bar and rushed off in search of Caltrop straight away. He began hitting her with it as soon as he found her, on the head, on the face, on the body, shouting accusations at her but giving her no chance to deny them. Aunt Xue came running out in answer to Caltrop's anguished cries and shouted to him to stop.

'How can you beat the girl like that without first making an attempt to find out what has happened? She's given us years of faithful service: it's unthinkable that she'd do a

thing like that. Time enough to start laying about you after you've made a serious attempt to get to the bottom of it.'

When Jin-gui heard her mother-in4aw saying this, she was afraid that Xue Pan might weaken. Her crying rose in pitch into a sort of plaintive yell.

'You have monopolized Moonbeam now for over a fortnight and refused to let anyone but Lily sleep with me. You rush to Moonbeam's defence when I say you ought to flog her, and now you get in a temper and start beating Lily. I don't know why you don't stop all this play-acting and get rid of *me;* then you will be free to pick a really rich, good-looking girl to marry.'

Her words had the intended effect of further inflaming Xue Pan. Aunt Xue could see that her son was being manipulated and was thoroughly disgusted by the unscrupulous way in which Jin-gui maintained her hold on him. But what could she do? She knew the weakness of her son's character and realized that his subservience to Jin-gui had already become a habit. Evidently he had seduced Jin-gui's maid, that much was dear; yet Jin-gui was one moment accusing him of forcibly 'monopolizing' the girl, while the next moment she seemed to claim credit for deferring like a good wife to his wishes. And who could be responsible for the black magic? The proverb says that even the wisest judge will hesitate to pronounce on household matters. Adapting it to the present circumstances, it might be said that even a parent finds it difficult to pronounce on the marital problems of his offspring. Aunt Xue, certainly, felt quite helpless when confronted with those of her son. She could only shout at him in exasperation.

'Worthless creature ! Even a dog would behave in a more seemly manner than you do! Now, it seems, you have got your muddy paws onto your wife's own maid that she brought with her from her home. You've heard her yourself accusing you of taking the girl away from her. How are you going to show your face anywhere when other people get to hear about it? And this other business: Heaven only knows who is responsible; yet here you go, lashing out at this poor child here before making the slightest effort to find out what really

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happened. We all know what a fickle creature you are, but really! What a return for the years of loyal service she has given you! I don't care *how* dissatisfied you are with her, you ought not to beat her. I'll get a dealer here right away and have her sold; that's the only way to settle this. Then you won't be troubled by her any more. Come, girl!' she said to caltrop, 'get your things together and come with me.' She turned to the other servants. 'Quickly now, go and get the dealer! It doesn't matter what we sell her for; just let's get rid of this - this thorn in the flesh, and perhaps we shall have a bit of peace again in this household!'

Xue Pan, seeing that his mother was really angry, stood with bowed head throughout this tirade and made no attempt to reply. It was Jin-gui's strident wail from inside the window that answered her.

'Whether you want to sell the girl or not, Mrs Xue, I think you might leave *me* out of it. Are you implying that I'm such a vinegar-wife that I can't tolerate an inferior? And what do you mean, "thorn in the flesh"? Thorn in whose flesh? Even if I did hate her so much, I wouldn't let him have my own maid to replace her with.'

'What sort of manners are these?' Aunt Xue was trembling all over and her voice was choking. 'Since when did it become acceptable for a young woman to shout at her mother-in-law through the window? I was under the impression that you had been brought up in an educated household. All this shouting and screaming - I can't make out what you are trying to say.'

Xue Pan stamped his foot and shouted at Jin-gui despairingly.

'Oh stop, stop! You'll have everyone laughing at us.'

Jin-gui, thinking, no doubt, that having gone so far she might as well go all the way, only shouted the louder.

'Why should I care if people laugh at us? Your darling chamber-wife has been trying to do me in. Is this a time to start worrying about whether people are laughing at us or not? Why don't you keep her and sell me instead? Everyone knows how rich the Xues are and how they make use of their money in order to trample on other people. And every-

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one knows about their fine relations who will always step in and slap anyone down for them who is giving them trouble. what are you waiting for? I don't know why you married me in the first place if you find me so unsatisfactory. I'm sure *I* didn't ask you to come running round to our house, begging and entreating my mother to let you have me as your wife.'

She rolled about on the bed, weeping and screaming and beating her bosom. Xue Pan was beside himself. Whether he rebuked her, reasoned with her, beat her, or begged her to be silent, it seemed unlikely that anything he did would have much effect. He could only stump in and out of the room, sighing and groaning inarticulately, and concluded by exclaiming, with great bitterness, that he was 'a very unlucky man'.

Meanwhile Bao-chai had persuaded her mother to come indoors. Aunt Xue continued to insist that Caltrop must be sold. Bao-chai smilingly expostulated.

'People like us don't *sell* servants, Mamma, we only buy them. I think anger is interfering with your judgement. What would people think if they heard that we were planning to sell a servant? They would laugh us to scorn. If Pan and his wife are dissatisfied with Caltrop, let her stay here and work for me. I could do with another maid.'

'If we keep her, it will seem to them like a provocation,' said Aunt Xue. 'Much better send her away and be done with it.

'I can't see that it makes any difference,' said Bao-chai. 'Provided she never goes into the front part of the

house, then as far as they are concerned, it will be just as if she had been sold.'

Caltrop was already at Aunt Xue's feet begging to be allowed to stay and protesting her willingness to serve Bao-chai as a maid. Aunt Xue was obliged to relent.

From now on Caltrop spent all her time with Bao-chai and stopped going into the front part of the house altogether. She had at least security now; but for all that she was not entirely happy. Sometimes on fine, clear nights she would gaze wet-checked at the moon; at other times she might be heard unaccountably sighing to herself while she trimmed a lamp.

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The fact was that although she had lived with Xue Pan for several years, she had never borne him a child. Some defect in the blood had made her unable to conceive. And now she was ill too. The effect of all the emotional and physical outrage to which she had recently been subjected was that a flood of fiery humour was released into her liver, leading eventually to a drying up of the menstrual fluid. She became very thin, yet had lost all interest in food. The doctor was called in and medicines were prescribed, but they seemed to do her no good.

Meanwhile Jin-gui had had several more scenes with her husband. Sometimes, when drink had made him bold, Xue Pan would try to assert himself. Once or twice he went for her with a cudgel or a knife; but Jin-gui only offered him her body to belabour, or stretched her neck out and defied him to do his worst; and of course he could not; he could only bluster. This soon became the established pattern of their quarrels. The only result of it was that Jin-gui's power over her husband grew all the stronger.

At this point Jin-gui began directing her attention on Moonbeam, picking on her and finding fault with her. But Moonbeam was made of more inflammable stuff than Caltrop. Up to now she and Xue Pan had got on together so swimmingly that she had all but dismissed Jin-gui from her mind. Finding herself now under attack from that quarter, she was unwilling to yield an inch and gave back as good as she got. When, after a few slanging-matches, Jin-gui grew really angry and began not only to curse her but to lay hands on her as well, she did not quite dare to return blow for blow, but she put on a fine display of hysteria, shrieking, rolling about on the floor and threshing about with her limbs. Thereafter she was constantly threatening suicide, and at any hour of the day or night they might have to snatch knives or scissors from her grasp or take down the noose which she had fastened for herself over a beam. Between the two of them Xue Pan was driven half distracted. He could only look on helplessly while they quarrelled, until finally the rumpus got too much for him and he would slip out of the house and take refuge elsewhere.

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Sometimes in the intervals between quarrelling, if she was feeling cheerful, Jin-gui would gather a few people together to play at dice or cards. She was inordinately fond of gnawing bones, especially the bones of fowls. To satisfy this craving she had ducks and chickens killed every day. The meat she gave to other people; it was only the bones, crisp-fried in boiling fat, that she kept for herself, to nibble with her wine. Sometimes, if the bone she was gnawing was giving her trouble and she grew impatient, she would swear like a trooper.

'That ponce and his poxy strumpet seem to enjoy themselves,' she would say self-pityingly. 'Why can't *I* get any enjoyment?'

Aunt Xue and Bao-chai no longer attempted to intervene. Now they could only sit in their own room and weep in silence while they listened to the profanities next door. Xue Pan was helpless. He bitterly regretted the brief madness which had led him to chain himself to this demon wife. Soon everyone in the two mansions, both masters and servants, had heard about the Xues' predicament and all felt sorry for them.

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By this time Bao-yu's hundred days of convalescence had ended and he was allowed to go out. One of the first things he did was to call on Jin-gui. There was nothing exceptionable in her behaviour or appearance on the occasion when he saw her: she seemed to be just the same sort of delicate, flowerlike creature as all the other girls. How did so beautiful a person come to have so appalling a character? It was a mystery which continued to occupy him for some time after the visit.

When, a few days later, he called in to wish his mother good morning, his visit happened to coincide with that of Ying-chun's nurse. She brought distressing news about Sun Shao-zu's behaviour.

'Whenever she is on her own, the young mistress does nothing but cry,' said the woman. 'She's longing for you to send for her so that she can enjoy a day or two of freedom.'

'I've been meaning for some days to send for her,' said

Lady Wang, 'but so many disagreeable things have been happening lately that I keep forgetting. Bao-yu spoke to me about this when he got back from his visit the other day. Tomorrow is a good day, according to the calendar. We will send for her tomorrow.'

Just then a servant arrived from Grandmother Jia's with a message for Bao-yu. He was to go first thing next morning to the Tian Qi Temple to burn incense in payment of a vow she had made for his recovery. Eager for outings after his long confinement, he was hardly able to sleep that night for excitement.

Next day he rose at dawn, and as soon as he had washed and dressed, set off by carriage, accompanied by two or three old nannies, and drove through the West Gate of the city to the Tian Qi Temple outside the walls.

The Taoists of the temple had spent the previous day preparing the place for his arrival. Because of his nervous disposition he did not care to get too close to the hideous guardian deities and other horror-inspiring images for which this temple was famous. As soon as he had presented the paper figures, spirit money, food and so forth which constituted the offering, he withdrew to the residential part of the temple and, alter taking lunch there, set off on a sight-seeing tour of the temple and its precincts, accompanied by the old nannies and by Li Gui and the other grooms. But the sight-seeing soon fatigued him and he withdrew to the monks' quarters again for a rest. The old nannies considered that it would be bad for him to sleep so soon after eating and called in the Taoist priest-in-charge, Father Wang, to sit and talk with him.

This Father Wang had knocked about the world in his rime as an itinerant vendor of panaceas and even now had his name-plate hung up outside the temple with an impressive list of the pills, powders, plasters and potions that he was prepared, for a consideration, to dispense. He was a frequent visitor at the Ning and Rong mansions and was known to everyone there - as to everyone else outside - as 'One Plaster Wang' from his habit of always concluding the patter with which he recommended his medicaments with the same

formula: 'One plaster will suffice, ladies and gentlemen; one single plaster will suffice.'

When One Plaster Wang arrived, Bao-yu was reclining on the kang looking half-asleep and Li Gui and the others were doing their best to keep him awake.

'An, Father Wang!' they said as he entered. 'You've come just in time. Everyone's always saying how good you are at telling funny stories. Won't you tell one now for our young master?'

‘I think I had better,’ said One Plaster Wang, smiling. ‘We don’t want him sleeping after his lunch. The batter he’s lust eaten might start battering his insides.’

This was not a bad beginning. At least it made them all laugh. Bao-yu, laughing with the others, got up and straightened out his clothes. One Plaster Wang ordered one of his acolytes to ‘make some good, strong tea’.

‘Master Bao doesn’t want any of your tea, said Tealeaf. ‘Your room stinks of medicine.’

‘O fie!’ said One Plaster Wang in comic outrage. ‘O monstrous imputation! Never has medicine of any kind found its way into this room. Moreover, for the past three or four days, ever since I heard your master was coming here, I have been burning incense to sweeten it.’

‘I’m always hearing about your plasters,’ said Bao-yu. ‘Tell me, what sort of things are they good for?’

‘My plasters?’ said the old Taoist. ‘Ah, now you’ve started something! It’s impossible to do them justice in a few words. To begin with, there are one hundred and twenty different ingredients in the ointment I use on them. Some of them dominate over the others like a prince over his subjects, some of them combine with each other in equal strength; some generate heat, some coolness; some of them are cheap and some expensive. Internally they stabilize and fortify the humours, enrich the blood, stimulate the appetite, tranquillize the spirits, banish excessive heat and cold, aid digestion and loosen phlegm; externally they regularize the pulses, relax the muscles, draw out the old, corrupt flesh, promote new growth, expel rheums and neutralize poisons. Their efficacy is miraculous, as you yourself may see if you ever have occasion to use one.’

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‘I can hardly believe that a single plaster can do so many things,’ said Bao-yu. ‘I wonder if the trouble I am thinking of could be cured by one.’

‘My plasters will cure any illness you like to mention,’ said the old Taoist. ‘If they don’t give you instant relief, you are at liberty to pluck me by the beard, slap my old face, and pull my temple down! What is the illness you have in mind?’

‘Try and guess,’ said Bao-yu. ‘If you can guess right, I shall believe in the efficacy of your plasters.’

One Plaster Wang thought for a bit.

‘Hmn, difficult.’ He smiled slily. ‘Of course, there are some things that it’s not very c*onvenient* to use plasters for.’

Bao-yu told all the servants but Tealeaf to go out of the room.

‘This room is too small for so many people,’ he said. ‘The air in it is becoming foul.’

Tealeaf lit a stick of Sweet Dreams incense and Bao-yu made him sit close to him, with the lighted incense in his hand, so that he could lean on him for support. Watching this little pantomime, the cunning old Taoist had a sudden inspiration. His face broke into a broad grin. Coming up closer to Bao-yu, he bent down and spoke softly into his ear.

‘I think I’ve guessed. Could it be that you have started bedchamber exercises already and are looking for a little something to help things along?’

Almost before he had finished, Tealeaf was shouting at him indignantly.

‘Get away with you! Dirty old man!’

Bao-yu had not understood.

‘*What’s* that?’ he asked Tealeaf, puzzled. *What* did he say?’

‘Never mind what he said,’ said Tealeaf. ‘Silly rubbish!’

‘You’d better tell me yourself what it is, Master Bao,’ said One Plaster Wang, unwilling to risk another guess.

‘The thing I want to know about is jealousy,’ said Bao-yu. ‘Could one of your plasters cure a woman of being jealous?’

One Plaster Wang clapped his hands and laughed.

‘Now there you have me! Neither my plasters nor anyone else’s could do that!’

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‘They are not such great shakes after all then,’ said Bao-yu, smiling.

‘I said *plasters* couldn’t,’ said One Plaster Wang. ‘I know of an infusion that might. The only thing is, it would take rather a long time. There’s no lightning cure for jealousy.’

‘What is this infusion called?’ said Bao-yu. ‘How do you make it?’

‘It’s called *Pirum saccharinum,*’ said One Plaster Wang. ‘You take one very good autumn pear, two drams of crystal sugar, one dram of bitter-peel and three cups of water and simmer them all together until the pear is soft. If the sufferer can be made to eat one such pear, together with its juices, first thing every morning, she will, eventually, be cured.’

‘I don’t think much of that,’ said Bao-yu. ‘I can’t see that working.’

‘If it doesn’t work the first time, perhaps it will by the tenth,’ said the old Taoist. ‘If one year’s treatment is insufficient, she must persevere for a second. And so on. At all events, these are wholesome ingredients. A pear prepared in this way is soothing to the lungs and stomach, innocuous to the health, sweet to the palate, lenitive for a cough and in every way agreeable. Sooner or later the woman will die; and as there is no jealousy (that I know of) after death, it could be said that by that time she had been cured.’

This set Bao-yu and Tealeaf off into fits of laughter. ‘Oily-tongued old ox’ they called him.

‘Well, what’s the harm?’ said One Plaster Wang. ‘It’s only a bit of nonsense to stop you sleeping in the middle of the day. Making you laugh is worth much more than any medicine. Even my plasters are only tomfoolery. Do you think if I really had a magic formula I’d be sitting here talking to you now? I’d have taken it myself long ago and gone off to join the immortals.’

The hour of sacrifice had now arrived and Bao-yu was invited to offer his libation and set fire to his paper hecatomb. What remained of the more substantial part of the offering -the foodstuffs and the wine - was shared out among the Taoists and the others present. Having completed what he came out for, he drove back into the city.

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By the time he got home Ying-chun had already been back an hour or more. The servants who brought her were being entertained to dinner before returning to the Sun household. Ying-chun meanwhile was in Lady Wang’s room giving her and the cousins a tearful account of her matrimonial troubles.

‘Sun Shao-zu is an out-and-out libertine. Gambling, drinking and chasing after women are the only things he cares about. He has corrupted practically every maid and young woman in the house. I have protested to him about it more than once, but he only swears at me. He calls me a “jealous little bitch”. He says that Father borrowed five thousand taels from him and spent it all, and that though he has been round time and again to ask for it, Father refuses to pay it back. Then he points his finger at me and shouts: “Don’t put on the lady wife act with me, my girl! You’re no better than a bought slave - payment in kind for the five thousand taels your old man owes me - and if you’re not very careful I shall give you a good beating and send you to sleep with the maids.” He says it was Great-grandfather who took the Initiative in making the alliance between our families because theirs was so rich and influential, so that by rights he ought to be Father’s equal. He says he was a fool to marry me, because that makes Father his senior; and besides, he says, it has given people the impression that he needed our help, whereas in fact quite the reverse is true.’

Ying-chun sobbed bittely while she told them this and the others wept as they listened. Lady Wang did her best to comfort her.

‘He’s obviously an unreasonable man,’ she said; ‘but now that you’re married to him, there’s really nothing to

be done. I remember your Uncle Zheng speaking very strongly against the marriage to your father, but your father was so set on it, he wouldn't listen. It's a bad business. My poor child! I'm afraid it must be your fate.'
Ying-chun wept.
'I can't believe that it was my fate to be so unhappy. After losing my mother as a tiny child, it seemed such bliss when you brought me here to live with Cousin Wan and

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the girls. And now, after just a few years of blessedness, I am to end like this!'
Lady Wang tried once more to comfort her. She suggested that Ying-chun herself should decide where she wished to sleep.
'Since the very first moment I left I have been longing every minute of the day and night to be back here with the girls,' said Ying-chun. 'And next to them I have missed my beloved Amaryllis Eyot. If only I might spend another four or five days in the Garden, I think I could die content. Who knows if I shall ever be allowed to come and stay here again?'
'Now, now, that's a foolish way to talk!' said Lady Wang. 'A little jangling between newly married couples is the commonest thing in the world. There is no cause at all to be so tragic about it.'
She gave orders for the rooms on Amaryllis Eyot to be made ready as quickly as possible, and told the cousins to keep Ying-chun company and do their best to distract her from her troubles. She particularly impressed upon Bao-yu that no word of this was to reach the ears of Grandmother Jia.
'If I find that Grandmother has got to hear of this,' she warned him, 'I shall hold you alone responsible.'
Bao-yu had to promise that he would say nothing.
That evening saw Ying-chun installed once more in her old apartment, with everyone round her, cousins and servants alike, doing their utmost to make her feel cherished. Three days she spent in her old apartment in the Garden; after that she had to go and stay with Lady Xing. Before doing so she called on Grandmother Jia and Lady Wang to say good-bye. Her leave-taking with the cousins which followed was extremely painful. It was all that Aunt Xue and Lady Wang could do to calm the young people in their grief.
Ying-chun stayed two days with Lady Xing and it was to Lady Xing's place that the Sun family servants came to collect her. Needless to say, she felt little inclined to go with them; but fear of her husband's evil temper made her conceal her reluctance and hurry over her leave-taking. Lady Xing had

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never been much interested in her daughter's welfare -during the two days that Ying-chun was with her she never once inquired whether her relations with her husband were harmonious and the duties required of her in her new household not too onerous - and such expressions of maternal sentiment as she may have indulged in at her departure were of only the most perfunctory and superficial kind.
As to what followed her departure: to know that, dear reader, you will have to look into another volume.

EXPLICIT TERTIA PARS LAPIDIS HISTORIAE

CHAPTER 81

Four young ladies go fishing and divine the future Bao-yu receives a homily

and is re-enrolled in the Family School

TO CONTINUE OUR STORY

After Ying-chun's departure, Lady Xing continued as though nothing had happened. It was Lady Wang who had gone out of her way to be kind, and her sympathy was genuine and deeply felt. In the morning, when Baoyu came to her apartment to pay his respects, he found her a!one, sighing pensively to herself. He thought he could see traces of tears on her cheeks, and not wanting to intrude, stood to one side. When she told him to sit down, he sidled up onto the kang and settled down next to her.

He lapsed at once into a silent stare, and she could tell that he had something on his mind.

'Well, and what are *you* looking so glum for?'

'Nothing really... I just can't stop thinking about Cousin Ying. It's so awful. I haven't mentioned it to Grannie, hut I haven't been able to sleep properly for two nights now. How helpless and defenceless she must feel, especially after growing up in a family like ours! She's so weak too, and never could stand up for herself properly. Why should she of all people have to fall into the hands of such a bully, someone who'll never be able to give her the sort of tenderness and understanding she needs?'

He was on the verge of tears.

'It is hard, I know,' said Lady Wang. 'But as they say, marry a daughter, throw out the water". At this stage, what is there I could possibly do?'

'I've thought of something,' replied Bao-yu somewhat unexpectedly. 'It came to me last night. If we report the whole thing to Grannie, we can get her permission to fetch Ying and move her back to Amaryllis Eyot. Why not? She'll be able to lead her old carefree life, we'll all be together again, and that Mr Sun can go to hell and take his temper with him! If he dares to try and ask for her back, we'll simply refuse to let her go. He can come a hundred times, we'll never give in. We'll just say that it's Grannie's orders, and he won't be able to do a thing. Don't you think it's a brilliant plan?'

'My dear child!' exclaimed Lady Wang, her voice registering both amusement and motherly vexation at this effusion. 'There you go again; carried away by yet another of your silly ideas! How *can* you be so hopelessly naive? Can't you see that sooner or later every girl has to leave home, and that once she's married her own family has no business to interfere? She must look to her own future. If fate has been kind to her, well and good. If not, she must learn to live with it all the same. You must know the old rhyme:

When rooster crows at break of day,
All his hen-folk must obey.
No choice for a dog's wife
But to make the best of a dog's life.

Not all the girls can be called to court like your elder sister, you know. Besides, Ying is still an inexperienced wife, and her husband a young man. Their temperaments differ, and if at this early stage they don't get on very well together, that's only to be expected. Given time, when they've both learned to understand one another better and have a family of their own, things will sort themselves out, I'm sure they will. You're certainly not to breathe a word of this to your grandmother! If I discover that you have, I shall be extremely cross. Now, off you go, I've heard quite enough of your nonsense.

Realizing that his mother was adamant, Bao-yu sat there a while longer in silence, then walked listlessly out of

the room. Choking with frustration, he made his way back to the Garden and straight to the Naiad's House. The instant he entered the door, he let out a great wail and burst into tears.

Dai-yu, who had only just that minute finished washing and putting up her hair, was shocked to see the state he was in and asked in some alarm:

'Whatever's the matter? Who's upset you?'

Bao-yu, however, was already slumped over the table, sobbing his heart out and far too distraught to reply to her questions. From her chair Dai-yu studied him anxiously for a while, before asking again:

'Well, at least let me know if I'm the culprit or not...

'That's not it! It's nothing like that!' he replied at last, with a despairing motion of his hand.

'Then why the tears and everything?'

'I just think the sooner we all die the better! There's no joy left in life!'

'What *do* you mean? Have you gone quite mad?'

'I'm not in the slightest mad. Let me explain and I'm sure you'll feel as I do. When Ying was here, you saw how she looked, you heard everything she said, didn't you? Why is it that the minute they're grown up, girls are married off and have to suffer so? When I think of the happy times we all had together when we first started the Crab-flower Club, always inviting each other round for parties and holding poetry contests - there seemed no end of wonderful things to do. And now? Bao-chai has already moved out, which means Caltrop can't come over either, and with Ying gone as well, our band of kindred spirits is being broken up, everything is being spoiled!

'I had thought of a plan, to get Grannie on our side and rescue Ying. But when I told Mother, she just called me naive and silly and wouldn't take me seriously. So I had to give up the idea.

'You only have to look around you! Our Garden's altered so much in such a short time. What could become of it in the next few years just doesn't bear thinking about. Now do you see what I mean, and why I can't help despairing?'

As she listened to all that he was saying, Dai-yu very slowly bowed her head and moved back almost imperceptibly onto the kang. She did not say a word, but only sighed and curled up facing the wall.

This was how Nightingale found them when she came in to serve tea. Her attempts to puzzle out what could have happened were cut short by the arrival of Aroma.

'So this is where you are!' she said as she came into the room. 'You're wanted at Her Old Ladyship's, Master Bao. I thought I'd find you here...

Recognizing Aroma's voice, Dai-yu sat up a little and nodded to her to sit down. Bao-yu noticed that her eyes were **red** from crying.

'I got a bit carried away, coz,' he said. 'Please don't take it to heart so. What you must do is look after yourself properly and get fit and well. And when I say that, I mean it. So have a rest now. I'm wanted at Grannie's. I'll be back.'

With these words he set off.

'What's up with you two then?' whispered Aroma.

'Oh, he's upset about Miss Ying,' Dai-yu replied. 'I'm all right. My eyes have been itching and I've been rubbing them, that's all.'

Aroma said nothing and hurried out after Bao-yu. He reached Grandmother Jia's only to find that she had already retired for her midday nap, and was obliged to go back to **Green** Delights.

In the afternoon he woke from his sleep feeling very bored, and picked up a book to read. Aroma hurried off to make tea, eager to sustain him in his studies. He had chanced upon an anthology of early verse, and as he turned its pages found himself reading a stanza by Cao

Cao:

Come drink with me and sing,

For life's a fleeting thing.
Full many a day has fled
Like the morning dew...

Far from distracting him, this only served to increase his ennui, and he put the book down and picked up another. This time it was '*The Gathering at Orchid Pavilion* and other Prose Selections from the Jin Dynasty'. After a page or two he suddenly closed it, and when Aroma returned with his tea, she found him sitting there, head propped on hand, looking his most dazed and distant.

'Why have you given up so soon?' she asked.

Bao-yu took his tea without a word of reply, drank a sip, then mechanically replaced the cup. Aroma was out of her depth and could do nothing but stand there dumbly looking on. Suddenly he stood up, and muttered sarcastically:

'Oh *gemlike ecstasy...'*

Aroma half-wanted to laugh, but on reflection thought it safer not to probe too far.

'If you don't feel like reading,' she suggested tactfully, 'why not go for a walk in the Garden? There's no sense in sitting here and working yourself up into one of your states again.'

Bao-yu mumbled something in reply and walked abstractedly out of the room.

He soon came to Drenched Blossoms Pavilion, and gazed out over the lake. All around him he saw nothing but dereliction and decay. Walking on, he reached All Spice Court, which was locked and shuttered. Only its rockery was still tenanted by the familiar herbs and creepers. He was just turning to go on past the Lotus Pavilion, when something caught his eye. Looking across the water, he could just distinguish a small group of people leaning over the stone balustrade on Smartweed Bank, and some maids down below, squatting on their heels and apparently searching for something. He darted behind a large rock and crept up on them, listening all the while.

'Will it come up? Will it...'

He thought he recognized the voice of Li Wan's cousin, Li Wen. Then came a laugh:

'There! It's gone! You see, I told you it wouldn't bite!' (There was no mistaking Tan-chun's voice.)

'Of course it won't if you keep moving about like that, Wen!'

'Look! It's going to!'

The last two voices were those of Li Wen's younger sister Qi, and Lady Xing's niece Xiu-yan.

Such an opportunity was altogether too tempting. Picking a brickbat from the ground, Bao-yu lobbed it into the water right in front of the four girls. There was a resounding splash and they jumped for their lives, with cries of:

'What the. .. Who's that trying to give us a scare? Of all the mean.

A beaming Bao-yu sprang from his hiding-place.

'Having a lovely time, are you? And why wasn't I invited, pray?'

It was Tan-chun who replied:

'Typical! I knew it! That had "Bao-yu" written all over it! Well I'm not going to waste my breath scolding you, just hurry up and catch us another fish to make up for that one. It was practically on the hook when you had to come along and scare it away.'

'Not likely!' said Bao-yu with a grin. 'Here you are on a fishing excursion and leaving me out - it's you who owe me a penalty!'

Everyone laughed.

'I know,' he went on. 'As we're all fishing today, why don't we try a round of "Fateful Fish"? It's very simple.If you catch a fish it means a year of good luck, and if you don't a year of bad luck. Come on, who's going to have first go?'

Tan-chun offered the rod to Li Wen, but she declined.

‘Oh well,’ said Tan-chun, ‘it looks as if I’ll have to start.

She turned to Bao-yu. ‘If you scare mine away again, brother, you’ll be for it.’

‘I only wanted to make you all jump. You’ll be perfectly safe this time, I promise.’
Tan-chun cast her line, and in just a few seconds a little ‘leaf-wriggler’ swallowed the hook and down went the float. She pulled in and landed her catch, alive and jumping. Scribe, after a lot of scrambling about, managed to get a grip on the thing, and carrying it over in both hands, placed it carefully in a little earthenware jar of fresh water. Tan-chun passed the rod on to Wen. She too felt a tug on the line almost immediately, and pulled in excitedly, only to find nothing on the hook. She cast out again, and this time stood there angling for ages. At last the line tautened and she pulled in again. Another false alarm. She picked up the hook to examine it, and discovered that it was buckled.
‘No wonder I couldn’t catch anything!’
She laughed and without more ado told Candida to straighten it out for her, put on some fresh bait and fasten on the reed-float securely. This time after only a few minutes, down went the float, in she pulled with great determination, and there it was - a little two-inch silver carp. Delighted, she turned to Bao-yu.
‘You next.’
‘Qi and Xiu-yan must go first,’ replied Bao-yu. ‘I insist.’
Xiu-yan was silent.
‘You go first, Cousin Bao,’ protested Qi. As she spoke a big bubble popped on the water.
‘Come On!’ cried Tan-chun. ‘There’s no need to overdo it. Look, the fish are all over there by you, Qi. You have a go quickly!’

Qi took the rod with a giggle of embarrassment. Sure enough, down went her float and she had a catch first time. Xiu-yan was the last of the girls to have her turn. She caught one and passed the rod back to Tan-chun, who handed it on to Bao-yu.

‘I shall follow in the footsteps of old Sire Jiang,’ he declared.

‘Straight was his hook,
His bait a single grain:
Yet of their own accord
The fish unto him came...’

Walking solemnly down the jetty, he sat at the water’s edge in the pose of the Fisherman Sage. Unfortunately, at the approach of this human shadow, the fish took refuge in the far end of the pond, and for all his exertions in the higher art of angling, a long time seemed to pass without the slightest sign of a bite. When once a fish did venture near and deigned to blow a few bubbles near the bank, he jerked the rod and scared it away.
‘Oh dear!’ he sighed. ‘It’s no good. The trouble is that I’m so confoundedly impatient, and the fish are so slow on the uptake. We must be incompatible. I shall never catch anything at this rate. Come on now, help me! *Feel* yourself being drawn, there’s my brave little fish!’
There was a peal of laughter from the girls. Then, before anyone could say a word, the line was seen to move a fraction. A bite at last! The sage yanked in for all he was worth. The rod crashed into a protruding rock and broke clean in two. The line snapped, and the hook (with whatever it may or may not have secured) sank without trace. This final stroke of virtuosity had his audience in stitches. Tan-chun called out:
‘I’ve never seen such a clumsy fool!’
As she was speaking, who should come rushing up but Musk, in a state of great excitement.
‘Master Bao, Her Old Ladyship has woken up and wants to see you at once!’

The five of them exchanged startled glances.
‘But what about?’ asked Tan-chun.
‘I don’t know,’ replied Musk. ‘All I heard was something about a "scandalous revelation" they want to question Master Bao about. They’ve asked Mrs Lian to come and answer questions as well.’
Bao-yu stood for a moment in stunned silence. Eventually he said:
‘I wonder which poor maid is in for the high jump this time?’
‘We’ve no idea what it’s about,’ said Tan-chun, ‘so Bao, you’d better go straight away and as soon as you’ve any news, send Musk over to let us know.’
The four girls went their way, and Bao-yu set off for Grandmother Jia’s apartment. He arrived to find her in the middle of a game of cards with Lady Wang, and realized to his relief that it could be nothing as serious as he had feared. Grandmother Jia saw him come in and asked him:
‘Bao darling, do you remember last year, when you were so seriously ill , and those two holy men - that mad-looking monk and that lame Taoist - came and cured you, in the nick of time - what did the illness feel like?’
Bao-yu reflected for a moment.
‘I can remember how it started. I was standing in my room when suddenly someone seemed to come from behind and ram something hard, like a wooden bar, up against the back of my head. It hurt like anything, my eyes started throbbing and everything went pitch-black. All I could see in the room was a mob of **green**-faced devils with huge fangs, carrying swords and cudgels. I went to lie down on the kang, but then it felt as if I had tight bands round my head and the pain became so excruciating that I no longer knew what was happening.
‘I remember how I got better. There was a ray of golden light from the hall outside my room, that shone right onto my bed. The devils just took to their heels and vanished. They seemed scared of the light. My headache went away and I felt quite myself again.’
‘You see!’ exclaimed Grandmother Jia, turning to Lady Wang. ‘It ties in perfectly.’
As she was speaking, Xi-feng entered the room and greeted first Grandmother Jia, then Lady Wang.
‘What did you want to ask me about, Grannie?’ she asked.
‘Tell me,’ replied Grandmother Jia, ‘can you recall that nasty attack you had last year?’
Xi-feng laughed.
‘Not very clearly. The main thing I remember about it is that I was possessed. There was someone manipulating me, filling my head with the most bloodthirsty intentions. I had a terrible urge to grab hold of everything in sight and kill it. I was exhausted, but I couldn’t stop.’
‘And then?’ asked Grandmother Jia. ‘When you were cured?’
‘There was a voice,’ replied Xi-feng, ‘that seemed to speak to me from nowhere. But what it said I honestly can’t remember.’
‘That settles it!’ exclaimed the old lady. ‘That’s exactly the sort of thing she got up to! So it *was* her doing, it must have been! Oh! How could the old woman sink so low - and Bao-yu’s own godmother too! Gracious Lord, to think that if those two holy men had not arrived in time, he might easily have died! And we still have not re-paid them...’
‘But Grannie,’ asked Xi-feng, ‘what made you think of all this in the first place?’
‘Ask your aunt,’ replied Grandmother Jia. ‘I’ve done enough of the talking.’
Lady Wang took over the story.
‘Sir Zheng told us when he was here this morning. Apparently Bao-yu’s godmother, Mother Ma, is an evil old woman and a practising witch. As the result of certain scandalous revelations, she’s been arrested by the secret police and sent to the Central Jail. I should imagine she’s been sentenced to death by now.
‘The whole thing started the other day, when a Mr Pan San-bao informed against her. He had been trying to sell a property to a pawnbroker across the street. His price had already risen by several hundred per cent, and when he asked for more the pawnbroker backed out. So; in an attempt to salvage his sale, Mr Pan hired the services of our

Mother Ma, whom he knew to be a regular visitor at the pawnshop and intimate with all the womenfolk there. She duly succeeded, by s6me evil means, in throwing the pawnbroker's wife into a convulsion, Then, waiting until the attack reached alarming proportions, she had the effrontery to arrive in person, claiming to possess a patent cure for the affliction. And sure enough, after a few burnt offerings of her paper charms, paper money and so forth, the wife recovered and the witch coolly demanded a dozen or so taels of silver for her services in exorcizing her own spell!

'But nothing escapes the watchful eye of the Good Lord Buddha,' continued Lady Wang. 'Her detection and downfall were already close at hand. That same day, in her haste to leave the pawnbroker's premises, she inadvertently dropped a silk bundle. The pawnbroker picked it up, took a look inside, and noticed a number of paper figures and four unusually potent cakes of incense. He became suspicious, and when the old woman returned to recover her bundle he seized her and subjected her to a quick search. He discovered hidden on her person a casket containing two ivory statuettes, a male and a female, both completely naked you know those pocket-sized figures of the devil they use - and seven **red** embroidery needles.

'She was taken straight to the secret police, and when questioned revealed her intimate connections with the mistresses and young ladies of several eminent and wealthy families. The case was reported to the highest

> authorities, and her house was searched. They found quite a few clay figures of those horrible Spectral Furies and several boxes of narcotic incense; also, hanging in a hidden compartment behind the kang, a Seven Star Lamp with all kinds of straw effigies spread below it, some with bands round their heads, others with nails through their chests or padlocks round their necks. She had a whole cupboard full of spare paper figures, and there were account slips all over the floor, listing families dealt with and amounts outstanding, together with records of goodness knows how much money received for "oil and incense".'

'Our attacks were definitely her doing!' exclaimed Xi-feng. 'I remember now. It was after we recovered - when the old witch came to visit Aunt Zhao a couple of times to collect her "contributions" - something horrible seemed to come over her when she saw me; she went pale, and there was a nasty look in her eyes. I wondered what it meant at the time, but I just couldn't see any reason for her to cause trouble. After what you've just said, though, it all makes sense. With my responsibilities I can't help making enemies, and some of them are bound to try and get their own back somehow or other. But who could bear a grudge against Bao-yu? That must be pure malice.'

'Or jealousy,' suggested Grandmother Jia, 'because she knows I'm not as fond of Huan as I am of Bao-yu. Perhaps that's why she tried to harm you both.'

'Anyway,' said Lady Wang, 'as the old woman is already in prison, we won't be able to call on her to testify, and without her evidence we will never be able to make Aunt Zhao confess. Besides we simply can't have the family involved in a scandal of this sort. We must bide our time. She is certain to give herself away sooner or later.'

'You're quite right,' Grandmother Jia complimented Lady Wang. 'In cases like this it is so hard to prove anything without conclusive evidence. We must just be thankful that the all-seeing Lord Buddha and his bodhisattvas have kept our two from harm. There! It's all over! And please, Feng, don't ever bring the subject up again. You can both stay and have dinner with me.' She turned to Faithful and Amber. 'Tell them we are ready to be served.'

The old lady's parting shot did not go unnoticed by Xi-feng, who laughed and said:

'So now *I'm* the one that set *you* worrying, am I?'

Lady Wang laughed at them both. Meanwhile the waiting-women were standing expectantly outside the door, and Xi-feng told the junior maids that she and Lady Wang were staying to dinner and that they could commence service. As she was speaking, Silver came in with a message for Lady Wang from Sir Zheng. He had mislaid something, and would she go over after dinner and help him find it?

'You'd better go now,' said Grandmother Jia. 'You never know - it might be something important.'

'Yes, Mother.'

Leaving Xi-feng to hold the fort, Lady Wang walked over to her own apartment. A brief search soon revealed the missing item.

'Has Ying-chun gone back yet?' Jia Zheng asked her in the course of conversation. 'How is she getting on with the Suns?'

'The poor girl could do nothing but cry while she was here,' replied Lady Wang. 'She says her husband is an absolute monster.'

Jia Zheng sighed as she told him Ying-chun's sad tale.

'I knew they were unsuited,' he commented. 'But what could I do? Brother She insisted on going ahead with it. The child will have her share of suffering, I'm afraid.'

'They've not been married long, don't forget,' replied Lady Wang. 'We must hope that time will sort things out for them.'

She suddenly laughed.

'What's the joke?' asked Jia Zheng.

'Oh, I just remembered some nonsense of Bao-yu's. He came here first thing this morning specially to talk to me about Ying-chun.'

'Oh yes? What did he have to say?'

Lady Wang gave a humorous account of her early morning interview with Bao-yu and of his 'brilliant plan', which despite himself Jia Zheng found rather amusing.

'Speaking of Bao-yu,' he said, in a more serious tone, 'the boy spends all his time loafing about in the garden - it simply won't do. With one's daughters - well, one has one's disappointments, I realize, but in the long run girls get married and leave the family anyway. With a son, however, it is totally different. If *he* should fall by the wayside, the whole future of the family could be threatened.

'It so happens that only the other day a friend recommended a tutor, a widely-read scholar, a man of the highest principles, and what is more a southerner like ourselves. But I have come to the conclusion that s6uth-erners are altogether too easy-going for the boys up here in the capital, who misbehave themselves abominably and are most of them smart enough to get by without having to do a stroke of work. They're a bumptious breed to begin with, and if their teacher mollycoddles them and is not prepared to take them down a peg or two, it's a waste of everyone's time.

'That is why it has never been a family practice& to engage outside tutors, and why we have always had a member of the clan, an older man, with a decent smattering of culture of course, to run the school. Dai-ru, the present preceptor, may be rather a mediocre scholar, but he's certainly an effective disciplinarian, and sees to it that the work gets done. Bao-yu's present state of idleness is thoroughly unsatisfactory, and in my opinion the best solution would be for him to resume his studies at the Family School.'

'I agree with you entirely,' said Lady Wang. 'Since your last posting he has been constantly ill, and what with one thing and another has fallen a long way behind with his studies. I think the routine of going to school would do him good.'

Jia Zheng nodded, and they continued chatting for a while longer.

Little time was lost. The very next day, as soon as Bao-yu was up and had finished washing and combing his hair, a deputation of pages arrived and sent in the message: 'Sir Zheng wishes to see Master Bao.' Hurriedly tidying his clothes, Bao-yu went straight over to his father's study. He paid his morning respects and stood to attention.

'Tell me,' Jia Zheng began, 'what you have been doing recently in the way of work? A fair amount, were you going to say? A very *magnum opus* of your worthless doodling, no doubt... I have observed you of late. Your idleness goes from strength to strength. I am also constantly hearing of some new ailment of yours, or shall we

rather say ingenious pretext to play truant. I trust I find you fully recovered?
‘Another thing: I gather you spend the greater part of your time fooling around with your cousins in the garden, and that even the maidservants are permitted to participate in your infantile antics. Isn’t it time you grew up and acquired a little self-esteem? You must understand that those verses you write are not going to impress anyone. The only thing the examiners are interested in is a well-written composition. And the effort you have expended in that direction has so far been non-existent.
‘Now listen carefully to what I have to say. From today, I want you to forget all about your verses and couplets. You are to concentrate exclusively on Octopartite Compositions. I will give you twelve months’ grace. If by the end of that time you are still in your present unregenerate state, you may as well give up altogether, and I for my part shall have to think again about owning a creature like you as my son.’
He summoned Li Gui.
‘Inform Tealeaf that he is to take Bao-yu first thing tomorrow morning to collect the required textbooks, and then bring them here for my inspection. I shall be accompanying him to school myself.’
Turning to Bao-yu:
‘Off with you!’ he trumpeted. ‘I shall expect you early tomorrow morning.’
Bao-yu returned to **Green** Delights, where Aroma was anxiously awaiting him. The pleasure with which she received the news of his renewed course of study contrasted strangely with the incredulous horror that had rendered him speechless while in Jia Zheng’s presence, and that now prompted him to send an urgent message through to Grandmother Jia, begging her to intervene. She sent for him at once and said:
‘You should give it a try, my darling. You don’t want to anger your father. Don’t worry. Remember I shall always be here if you need me.
There was nothing for it but to go back and give the maids their instructions. ‘Wake me at the crack of 4awn, as Father will be waiting to take me to school.’ Aroma and Musk took it in turns to stay awake that night.
In the morning Aroma woke Bao-yu punctually, helped him wash, comb his hair and dress, and sent a junior maid out with instructions for Tealeaf to wait with the books at the inner gate. She had to spur him on a couple of times before finally he left and made his way towards the study. On his way he stopped to inquire if Sir Zheng had arrived yet, and was informed by a page from the study that one of the literary gentlemen had just called, but had been kept waiting outside, as the Master was still in his dressing-room. This calmed Bao-yu’s nerves a little, and he proceeded on to the inner sanctum. As luck would have it, a servant was at that very moment coming out on his way to fetch him, so he went straight in. After another brief homily, Jia Zheng led the way and father and son took a carriage to the school, Tealeaf following with the books.
A look-out had been posted, and Dai-ru had been alerted and was standing in readiness for the party’s arrival. Before the old man could come forward to greet him, however, Jia Zheng walked into the schoolroom and paid his respects. Dai-ru took him by the hand and inquired politely after Lady Jia. Bao-yu then went up and paid his respects. Jia Zheng remained standing throughout, and insisted on waiting until Dai-ru was seated before sitting down himself.
‘I have come here today,’ he began, ‘because I felt the need to entrust my son to you personally, and with a few words of instruction. He is no longer a child, and if he is to shoulder his responsibilities and earn a place in the world, it is high time he applied himself conscientiously to preparing for his exams. At home, unfortunately, he spends all his time idling about in the company of children. His verses, the only field in which he has acquired any competence, are for the most part turgid juvenilia, at their best romantic trifles devoid of substance.’
‘And he looks such a fine lad,’ interposed Dai-ru. ‘He seems so intelligent. Why this refusal to study, this per-verse streak of hedonism? Not that one should entirely neglect poetic composition. But there is surely time enough for that later on in one’s career.’
‘Precisely,’ said Jia Zheng. ‘For the present I would humbly suggest a course of reading and exegesis of primary scriptural texts, and plenty of compositions. If he should show the least sign of being a recalcitrant pupil, I

earnestly beseech you to take him in hand, and in so doing to save him from a shallow and wasted life.'
On this note he rose, and with a bow and a few parting remarks took his leave. Dai-ru accompanied him to the door.

'Please convey my respects to Lady Jia.'

'I will,' said Jia Zheng, and climbed into his carriage.

When Dai-ru returned to the classroom, Bao-yu was already sitting at a small rosewood desk in the south-west corner of the room, by the window. He had two sets of texts and a meagre-looking volume of model compositions stacked in a pile on his right. Tealeaf was instructed to put his paper, ink, brush and inkstone away in the drawer of the desk.

'I understand you have been ill, Bao-yu,' said Dai-ru. 'I hope you are quite recovered?'

Bao-yu rose to his feet.

'Quite recovered, thank you sir.'

'We must see to it that you apply yourself with zeal from now on. Your father is most insistent that you should do well. Start by revising the texts you have already memorized.

'Your timetable will be as follows:

Pre-prandium - General Revision

Post-prandium - Calligraphy

Meridianum - Exegesis

And conclude the day's work by reciting quietly to yourself a few model compositions. That should do for the time being.'

'Yes sir.'

As Bao-yu sat down again, he glanced around him. Most of the old faces from the Jokey Jin days were gone, and in their place were quite a few new boys. He reflected on their exceptionally boorish appearance, and the face of Qin Zhong came suddenly into his mind. Since the death of his friend there had been no one to keep him company in his studies, no one to share his innermost thoughts. He was overwhelmed with a sense of grief and loneliness, and sat silently staring at his books.

Not long afterwards Dai-ru came over to say that as this was his first day he could leave early.

'Tomorrow,' he said, 'I shall go through a passage with you. On second thoughts, to do justice to your natural intelligence, I should like you to expound a passage or two for me. That will give me a clearer idea of the sort of work you have been doing and the standard you have reached.'

Bao-yu's heart was already thumping. But to learn how he fared the following day, you must read the next chapter.

CHAPTER 82

An $_0$1d pedant tries to instil some Moral Philosophy
into his incorrigible pupil
And the ailing Naiad, in a nightmare, confronts the
spectres of her fevered mind

'Bravo!' cried Grandmother Jia as Bao-yu came in from school. 'So they've finally broken in my frisky colt! Come along now, your father will be expecting to see you I'm sure. Then you must find something nice and relaxing to do.'

‘Yes, Grannie.’
Bao-yu reported to the study.
‘Back already?’ said Jia Zheng. ‘Well, has the Preceptor given you a scheme of work?’
Bao-yu rehearsed his timetable: ‘*Pre-prandium* - General Revision; *Post-prandium* - Calligraphy; *Meridianum* -Exegesis and reading of model compositions.’
‘H’m...’ Jia Zheng nodded. ‘Fair enough. Off you go now and keep your grandmother company for a little while. Let’s see if you can turn over a new leaf and behave seriously from now on. No more of the old childish nonsense, eh? Go to bed on time, rise early, and attend your classes regularly. Understood?’
With a string of fluent ‘Yes Sirs’, Bao-yu backed smartly out of the study. He hurried over to see his mother, put in another brief appearance at Grandmother Jia’s - so brief that he hardly had time to turn around - then dashed off once more, impatient to reach the Naiad’s House.
‘I’m back!’ he called from outside the doorway. The unexpectedness of his arrival, and the explosion of laughing and clapping that announced it, gave Dai-yu quite a turn. Nightingale drew aside the portiere and he walked in and sat himself down.
‘Does my memory fail me,’ said Dai-yu, ‘or didn’t I hear something to the effect that you were going to school today? Haven’t you been let off rather early?’
‘Goodness!’ exclaimed Bao-yu. ‘I can hardly believe it! Yes, Father did banish me to *that place* - what an ordeal! I don’t know how I stuck it out! I thought I’d never see you all again! But now, one glimpse of you has raised my spirit from the dead! How does the old Song go?

‘Twas scarce a day we were apart
It seemed three autumns long!

That’s just how I feel.’
‘Have you been to see Grandmother and your parents?’ asked Dai-yu.
‘Yes, yes...
‘And the others?’
‘Not yet.’
‘Shouldn’t you go and see them now?’
‘But I don’t feel like going anywhere. All I want to do is sit here and chat with you for a bit. Anyway Father says from now on it’s "early to bed and early to rise" so the others will have to wait until tomorrow.
‘Very well then,’ said Dai-yu. ‘A short stay. Then you must be sensible and go and lie down.
‘But I’m not tired,’ protested Bao-yu. ‘Just fed up with all *that.* It’s doing me a world of good in fact, being here with you, if you’d only stop thinking of all these things I should be doing.’
A faint smile crossed Dai-yu’s face.
‘Nightingale, would you make Master Bao a cup of Dragon Well tea? We must see that scholarship is suitably rewarded.’
Nightingale smiled and went to fetch the tea, which she entrusted. to one of the junior maids. Bao-yu reacted smartly.
‘Scholarship! Why, you’re almost beginning to sound like one of *them!* I can’t abide all that hypocritical moralizing. And those absurd Octopartite essays, which they have the nerve to call "Propagation of Holy Writ", are nothing more than a shoddy way of worming themselves into a job. The wh6le thing makes me sick! Not content with botching together a few classical tags, they try to hide the fact that they haven’t got a single original idea of their own by churning out a lot of far-fetched **purple** passages -and then pride themselves on having been "subtle" and "profound". Urrghhh! Holy Writ! Holy Pretentious Humbug I’d call it! I know Father is forcing that sort of thing down my throat at present, and I just have to grin and bear it, but that’s no reason for you to go on

about it the moment I'm back.'

'I know girls don't have to read Octopartites,' replied Dai-yu. 'But when I was little and was having lessons with your cousin Yu-cun, I looked at a few and remember thinking that some were quite well thought out and sensibly written. One or two were even quite subtle, and had a certain delicate charm. They were rather above my head at the time, but I still enjoyed reading them. It's Silly to run them all down. Anyway, I think if you want to get on in life, this is quite an admirable way of doing

it.

Bao-yu could hardly believe his ears. What had come over Dai-yu? She had never preached wordly wisdom at him like this before. Not wishing to provoke a full-scale argument, however, he restricted himself to a little snort of amazement.

Meanwhile, voices could be heard outside.

'Aroma sent me to Her Old Ladyship's to fetch Master Bao home from school.' It was Ripple. 'I've tracked him down at last!'

'Go on,' replied Nightingale. 'Let him drink his tea first. It's just this minute been made.'

The two maids came in together, and Bao-yu laughed:

'I was just on my way, Ripple; you shouldn't have bothered to come.

'You'd best drink your tea and be off!' Nightingale chimed in, before Ripple could get a word in. 'Can't you see how they've been pining for you all day...

'Pscht! You mean little fibber!' cried Ripple, rising perfectly to the bait. Everyone laughed. Bao-yu finally stood up to say goodbye, and Dai-yu saw him to the door. Nightingale stood at the foot of the steps till he was on his way, and then she too went back indoors.

When Bao-yu arrived at **Green** Delights, Aroma emerged from the inner room to greet him.

'Finished scho6l then?' she asked.

'Oh, Master Bao's been back for ages,' Ripple answered for him. 'He's been at Miss Lin's.'

'Did anything happen while I was away?' asked Bao-yu.

'Oh, nothing much,' replied Aroma pointedly. 'Just a lecture from Faithful. Her Ladyship sent her to let us know that this time the Master is in deadly earnest about your studies, and if any of us dares to play the fool with you again, we'll be dealt with like Skybright and Chess.' She sighed. 'We do our very best to serve you, and that's all the thanks we get. It's all so pointless.'

Her evident distress brought a swift reply from Bao-yu.

'My poor Aroma! You've no need to worry. So long as I work hard, none of you need ever hear another word from Mother. I'm going to do some work this evening, as the Preceptor wants me to do some exposition tomorrow. If there's anything I need, Musk and Ripple can get it for me, so you go and have a rest.'

'If only you would work hard,' said Aroma, 'it would be a joy to serve you.

Inspired by her words, Bao-yu bolted his supper, had his reading-lamp lit and sat down straight away to revise his basic texts, the Four Books of Confucian Scripture. One glance at the first page, however, with its columns of heavily annotated text, and he began to experience a familiar sinking feeling. He tried flicking through one volume, and the general drift seemed clear enough; but the moment he went into it in any detail, it seemed to slip from his grasp. He turned for help to the marginal commentaries, he read the expository essays, keeping up the struggle till late in the evening.

'Poems are easy,' he thought to himself. 'But I can't make head or tail of this stuff.'

He sat back, gazed at the ceiling and was soon lost in a daydream.

'Bedtime,' said Aroma firmly. 'You've done quite enough work for this evening.'

Bao-yu gave an inaudible reply. Musk and Aroma helped him into bed, and then went to sleep themselves.

During the night, they woke to hear him tossing and turning on the kang.

'Are you still awake?' said Aroma. 'You must stop fretting and have a good night's sleep. You can work hard

again tomorrow.

‘I know,’ replied Bao-yu. ‘But I just can’t get to sleep. Come and take off one of my covers.

‘It’s a cold night. You’d better keep it on.

‘I feel so restless!’ He threw back the top cover himself. Aroma immediately clambered over to tuck it in again, and put her hand to his brow. It felt slightly feverish.

‘Lie still!’ she said. ‘You’ve a fever.’

‘I know.’

‘What’s the matter?’

‘It’s nothing. I’m just nervous, that’s all. Please don’t make a thing of it. If Father finds out, he’s bound to say I’m cooking up an excuse to miss school. It would seem too much of a coincidence. I’ll feel better in the morning, and once I’m at school it’ll go away.

Aroma gave in.

‘I’ll sleep here by your side,’ she said. She massaged his back a little and in no time they were both fast asleep. When they woke next morning the sun was already high in the sky.

‘Help!’ cried Bao-yu. ‘I’m late!’ He quickly washed and combed his hair, completed his round of m6rhing duties and set off for school. The Preceptor’s severe expression as he walked into the schoolroom did not bode well.

‘Tardy, boy, tardy! What is the meaning of this? Small wonder that you have incurred your father’s displeasure and caused him to call you his prodigal son, if this is the way you think you can behave on your second day.’

Bao-yu told him of his fever the night before, then crossed over to his desk and sat down to his work.

It was late in the afternoon when he was called forward.

‘Bao-yu, step up here. Oral Exposition of this text.’

> Bao-yu walked up. On inspection, he found to his relief that it was a rubric he knew. *Analects,* chapter IX, verse XXII: *Maxima Debetur Puero Reverentia* - RESPECT DUE TO YOUTH. ‘What a stroke of luck!’ he thought to himself. ‘Thank goodness it’s not from the *Mag**(Young scholars of that time were wont to use these affectionate abbreviations to refer to those two other venerable texts of Scripture, the *Magna Scientia* or (Great Learning and the Medium *Immutabile* or Doctrine of the Mean.

) or the *Med!’*

‘How do you wish me to begin, sir?’

‘Amplzficatio Totius, boy. Give the substance of the passage carefully in your own words.’

Bao-yu first recited the original chapter, in the prescribed sing-song intonation, and then began:

‘In this verse we have the Sage’s Exhortation to Youth to Seize the Hour and Strive with Zeal, lest they end up becoming...’

Bao-yu looked up at Dai-ru. The Preceptor sensed what was coming and tried to conceal his embarrassment with a short laugh:

‘Come on boy, come on. What is holding you back? Are you afraid of using a *non-licet* expression up to books? Remember: Scriptural Exegesis is exempt from the normal rules of Verbal Prohibition. *Liber Rituum,* Book I: *"In Canonicorum Classicorumque Librorum Studus Nomenclationum cessat Prohibitio."* What may they end up becoming?’

‘Complete Failures, sir,’ said Bao-yu, barely suppressing a mischievous smile. ‘In the first Segment, *Sunt Verendi,* the Sage is Spurring Youth on to Moral Endeavour in the Present, while the last Segment, *Non Sunt Digni Quos Verearis,* contains his Caution for the Future.’

He looked up again at Dai-ru.

‘That will do. *Interpretatio Partium.’*

Bao-yu began again:

‘Confucius saith: "For the Duration of Youth, each Spiritual and Mental Talent must be held in Due Esteem. For how can we ever Predict with Certainty another’s Ultimate Station in Life? But if a man, by Drifting and Wasting his Days, should reach the Age of Forty or Fifty and still be Unsuccessful and Obscure, then it can fairly’ be said that his Youthful Promise was an Empty One. 14e will have Forfeited For Ever the Esteem of his Fellow Men."‘

‘Your *Arnplificatio* Totius was passably clear,’ commented Dai-ru with a dry smile. ‘But I am afraid your In-*terpretatio Partium* showed a good deal of immaturity. In the phrase *sine Nomine, Nomen* refers not to Success in the Worldly Sense but rather to an Individual’s Achievement in the Moral and Intellectual Spheres. In this sense it by no means implies Official Rank. On the contrary, many of the Great Sages of Antiquity were Obscure Failures who Withdrew from the World; and yet we hold them in the Highest Esteem, do we not? *Nonne sunt Digni quos Vereamur?*

‘You construe the last sentence incorrectly,’ he droned on. ‘Here it is not the element of Esteem but the Irreconcilable Nature of the Judgement of his Fellow Men that is being contrasted with their Tentative Appraisal of him as a Youth (see second sentence of your text). This emphasis is central to a Correct Elucidation of the passage. Do you follow me?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Good. Here is another.’

Dai-ru turned back a few pages and pointed out a passage to Bao-yu. It was *Analects* again, this time chapter IX, verse XVIII: *Ego nondum vidi qui amet Virtutem sicut amat Pulchram Spedem* - THE RARITY OF A SINCERE LOVE OF VIRTUE. Bao-yu scented danger ahead and said with his most ingenuous smile:

‘I’m afraid I can’t think of anything to say, sir.

‘Nonsense, my boy! Is that what you would write if it turned up as a *Thema* in your paper)’

Reluctantly Bao-yu set the wheels in motion.

‘Confucius saith: ‘Men will not love Virtue, and yet they Fall Down and Worship Sensual Beauty at First Sight. The Reason for this Disaffection is that they are Blind to the Intrinsicality of Virtue. Beauty is an Intrinsic Quality too, and as such Loved by All, but it belongs to the Realm of Human Desire, whereas Virtue is a Natural Principle. How can Principle hope to Compete with Desire for the Affections of men? Confucius is both Lamenting the State of the World and Hoping for a Change of Heart. The Love of Virtue he has observed has been for the most part a Shallow and Short-lived Affair. How Fine it would be if only men would feel for Virtue the Devotion they feel towards Beauty...

‘Thank you, that will do,’ said Dai-ru. ‘I have but one question to put to you. If you understand the words of Confucius so well, why is it that you transgress these very two Precepts? I am only an outsider, but without need of explanation from your Father I can identify your Moral Shortcomings. One cannot hope to become a Man except by dint of Constant Self-Improvement. You are at present a Youth of Promise, or as our text has it *Puer Verendus.* Whether or not you Fulfil this Promise depends entirely on your own efforts. Are you to be a Man of Merit, *Vir Nominis,* or are you to be a Man No Longer Esteemed by his Fellow-Men, *Vir Non lam Verendus?*

‘I shall allow you an initial period of one month in which to revise your old texts thoroughly, and a further month in which to study models of Octopartite Composition. At the end of the second month I intend to set you your Maiden Theme. If I detect any sign of slackness on your part, y6u need not expect me to be lenient. As the saying goes:

Perfection comes through ceaseless effort;
Effortless ease brings but perditidn.

Be sure to bear in mind all that I have said.’

‘Yes sir.’

And so we must leave Bao-yu for the present, submitting reluctantly to his daily lessons. During his absence at school, **Green** Delights became unrecognizably quiet and the days passed slowly and uneventfully. Aroma even found time to do some sewing. One day she sat down to

finish a betel-nut 'refresher' bag she had been embroidering, and fell to thinking of the great change wrought in all their lives by Bao-yu's new routine. How easy life was for the maids now that he was away all day! If things had only been like this earlier, Skybright might never have come to such a wretched end. Poor Skybright! Aroma sighed; for does not the hare in the trap set the fox's heart a-beating? It was the shortest step from grieving for Skybright to brooding over her own future. What was to become of her? What sort of a life would she lead, asBao-yu's concubine? Bao-yu himself was no problem. She knew how to handle him. But what if he were to marry someone like Mrs Lian or Mr Pan's new wife? Was she fated to be a second You Er-jie or Caltrop? To judge from Lady Jia and Lady Wang's attitude in the past, and from the frequent hints dropped by Mrs Lian, it seemed a foregone conclusion that he would marry Miss Lin. Now *there* was a complicated young lady...

With this new turn of thought Aroma's colour deepened, her heart beat faster and her aim with the needle became more and more erratic. Finally she aband9ned her embroidery altogether and set off for the Naiad's House, determined to put Dai-yu's disposition t9wards her to the test.

Dai-yu was reading a book. When she saw Aroma come in, she moved over slightly and nodded to her to sit down.

'I hope you're feeling quite better, Miss,' began Aroma, anxious to create the right impression.

'Not really,' replied Dai-yu. 'I suppose I do feel a little less weak. What have you been doing at home?'

'Now that Master Bao's at school,' replied Aroma, (it's very quiet at home, so I thought I'd come round for a chat.'

Nightingale came in with tea and Aroma rose promptly to her feet.

'Please sit down, Nightingale dear.' She laughed as she continued. 'You've been making fun of us, so Ripple was telling me the other day...

'You don't take any notice of what she says, do you?' said Nightingale with a smile. 'All I meant was that with Master Bao away at school all day, and Miss Chai and Caltrop both living out, things must be dull for you.

Aroma seized her opportunity:

'Caltrop, did I hear you say? Oh, that poor girl! I feel so sorry for her! This new wife of Mr Pan's is a Total Eclipse if ever there was one! She's even worse than a certain person...' Here Aroma held up two fingers, indicating the Second Young Lady of the household - Xi-feng. 'This Mrs Pan doesn't seem to care a bit what people think.'

'That certain person was bad enough,' said Dai-yu. 'To think that You Er-jie is dead!'

'I know,' said Aroma. 'They were both human beings;after all. It was only their positions that were different. Why did she have to be so malicious? It hasn't done the family name any good.'

This was the first time Dai-yu had heard Aroma gossip like this, and she began to suspect what was at the back of it.

'It's hard to tell,' she said. 'In every family affair, one side or the other *has* to win. If it's not the East Wind it's the West.'

'A concubine should know her place,' said Aroma. 'She should be too scared to take advantage of the wife.'

At this point in the conversation an old woman's voice was heard in the outer courtyard.

'Is this where Miss Lin lives? Which maid is in charge here?' Snowgoose went out to see who it was, and vaguely recognized her as one of Aunt Xue's serving-women.

'What do you want?' she asked.

'I'm here on an errand for Miss Bao-chai,' replied the woman. 'Something for Miss Lin.'

'Wait here a minute.' Snowgoose went in to consult with Dai-yu, who told her to show the old woman in. Once inside the room, she curtseyed to Dai-yu, then screwed up her eyes and peered at her curiously. Not a word of her errand. Dai-yu began to feel rather embarrassed, and asked what it was that Bao-chai had sent over.

‘A pot of honeyed lychees is what I’ve been instructed by Miss Bao-chai to bring to you, Miss Lin,’ replied the old woman, her features relaxing into a smile. Then she spotted Aroma in the room. ‘Why, if it isn’t Master Bao’s maid, Miss Hua!’

‘That’s right, nanny dear,’ replied Aroma. ‘And how did you come to know who I was?’

‘Well, looking after Madam’s room as we do, we hardly ever go out visiting with Madam and Miss Bao-chai, so *you* wouldn’t recognize *us*. But *we* remember just about all the young ladies that come round *our* way.’

She handed the pot to Snowgoose, took another look at

Dai-yu, then turned back to Aroma and said with a confidential smile:

‘No wonder our Madam says that Miss Lin and your Master Bao were made for one another! She really does look just like a fairy!’

Aroma made a valiant attempt to avert any further blunders.

‘Come along, nanny, you must be tired. Why don’t you sit down and have a cup of tea?’

‘Oh no - we’re much too busy at home today,’ the old girl cackled on regardless. ‘We’ve everything to prepare for Miss Bao-qin’s Giving-away. And I’ve still two pots of lychees to deliver to Master Bao-yu from Miss Bao-chai.’

She took her leave and went waddling busily out of the room. Dai-yu, who for Bao-chai’s sake had tried to disguise her annoyance at the way the old woman had come barging in, called out after her:

‘Please thank Miss Bao-chai for her kind present.’

‘La-di-da-di-da!’ the old. girl could still be heard burbling away to herself. ‘Only Bao-yu would have the style to match such a fine lady...’

Dai-yu pretended not to hear.

‘Really,’ said Aroma, trying to laugh the whole thing off, ‘when people reach her age they just talk utter nonsense. You don’t know whether to scold or laugh.’

Snowgoose passed the lychees to Dai-yu. ‘I couldn’t; put them away, would you?’

They chatted a little longer and. then Aroma left.

That evening, when Dai-yu went into her side-room to undress for the night, she caught sight of the lychees again. They reminded her of the old woman’s visit, and revived the pain she had felt at her tactless gossiping. Dusk was falling, and in the stillness a thousand gloomy thoughts seemed to close in and oppress her mind.

‘My health is so poor... And time’s running out. I know Bao-yu loves me more than anyone else. But Grannie and Aunt Wang still haven’t mentioned it! If only my parents had settled it for us while they were still alive.. But suppose they had? What if they had married me to someone else? Who could ever compare with Bao-yu? Perhaps I’m better off like this after all! At least I’ve still some hope.’

Like the rope on a pulley her secret hopes and fears spun up and down, tangling themselves tighter and tighter round her heart. Finally, with a sigh and a few tears, she lay down in her clothes, weary and depressed.

She became vaguely aware of one of the junior maids coming in and saying:

‘Miss Lin, Mr Jia Yu-cun is outside and wants to see you.

‘What could he want?’ thought Dai-vu to herself. ‘I’m not a regular student of his. I’m not even a boy. He just happened to coach me when I was a little girl. Anyway, all the times he’s come to see Uncle Zheng he’s never once asked after me, so why should I have to see him now?’

She told the maid to convey her respects and thank Mr Yu-cun for calling, but to say that poor health obliged her to stay in bed.

‘But Miss,’ said the maid, ‘I think he’s come to congratulate you, and some people have come to take you to Nanking.’

As she was speaking, a group including Xi-feng, Lady Xing, Lady Wang and Bao-chai advanced into the

room and announced cheerfully:

'Congratulations my dear! And bon voyage!'

'What do you mean?' asked Dai-yu in great confusion.

'Come on now.' It was Xi-feng who replied. 'You needn't try and pretend you haven't heard the news. Your father's been promoted to Grain Intendant for Hupeh Province and has made a second and highly satisfactory marriage. He doesn't think it right that you should be left here on your own, and has asked Yu-cun to act as go-between. You're engaged to be married to a relation of your new stepmother's, a widower himself I believe. They've sent some servants to fetch you home. You'll probably be married straight away. It's all your stepmother's idea. In case you're not properly taken care of on the voyage, she has asked your cousin Lian to accompany you.'

Xi-feng's words made Dai-yu break out in a cold sweat. She now had a feeling that her father was still alive. She began to panic, and said defiantly:

'It's not true! It's all a trick of Xi-feng's!'

She saw Lady Xing give Lady Wang a meaningful look:

'She won't believe us. Come, we are wasting our time.'

'Aunt Wang! Aunt Xing! Don't go!' Dai-yu begged them, fighting back her tears. But she received no reply. They all gave her a curious smile, and then left together.

As she stood there and watched them go, panic seized her. She tried to speak, but the only sound that came was a strangled sobbing from the back of her throat. Then she looked about her and saw that somehow she had been transported to Grandmother Jia's apartment. In that same instant she thought to herself: 'Grannie's the only one that can save me now!' and fell at the old lady's feet, hugging her by the knees.

'Save me Grannie, *please!* I'd rather die than go away with them! That stepmother's not my real mother anyway. I just want to stay here with you!'

Grandmother Jia's face only registered a cold smile.

'This has nothing to do with me.'

'But what's to become of me, Grannie?' she sobbed.

'Being a man's second wife has its advantages,' Grandmother Jia replied. 'Think of the double dowry you'll have.'

'If I stay, I w[6]n't cause you any extra expense, I promise I won't. Oh please save me!'

'It's no use,' said Grandmother Jia. 'All girls marry and leave home. You're a child and don't understand these things. You can't live here for ever, you know.'

'I'll do anything to stay - I'll work for my keep, be a slave, anything! Only please don't let them take me away!' This time Grandmother Jia made no reply. Dai-yu hugged her again and sobbed:

'Oh Grannie! You've always been so good to me, fussed over me so - how can you treat me like this in my hour of need? Don't you care about me any more? I may not be one of your real grandchildren, a true Jia like the others, but my mother was your own daughter, your own flesh and blood! For her sake have pity on me! Don't let me be taken away!'

With these last words she flung herself frantically upon Lady Jia, burying her head in her lap and sobbing violently.

'Faithful,' the old lady commanded, 'take Miss Dai-yu to her room to rest. She is wearing me out.'

There was no mistaking the finality in Grandmother Jia's voice. To Dai-yu, suicide now seemed the only course. She rose, and as she walked from the room her heart yearned for a mother of her own to turn to. All the affection shown her by grandmother, aunts and cousins alike, had now been exposed for what it was and had been all along - a sham. Suddenly she thought: 'Why haven't I seen Bao-yu today? *He* might still know of a way out.' And as the thought entered her mind, she looked up and sure enough, there, standing right in front of her, all laughter and smiles, was Bao-yu himself.

‘My warmest congratulations, coz!’

This was too much for Dai-yu. Her last vestige of maidenly reserve vanished. She clutched hold of him and cried out:

‘Now I know how heartless and cruel you really are, Bao-yu!’

‘No, you are wrong,’ he replied. ‘But if you have a husband to go to, then we must go our separate ways.

Dai-yu listened in despair as this, her very last hope, was taken from her. Clinging to him helplessly, she gave a feverish cry:

‘Oh Bao! I’ve no separate way to go! How could you say such a thing!’

‘If you don~t want to go, then stay here,’ he replied calmly. ‘You were originally engaged to me. That’s why you came to live here. Has it never occurred to you how specially I’ve always treated you? Haven’t you noticed?’

Suddenly it all seemed clear. She really was engaged to Bao-yu after all. Of course she was! In an instant her despair changed to joy.

‘*My* mind is made up once and for ever! But you must give me the word. Am I to go? Or am I to stay?’

‘I’ve told you, stay here with me. If you still don’t trust me, look at my heart.’

With these words he took out a small knife and brought it down across his chest. Blood came spurting out. Terrified out of her wits, Dai-yu tried to staunch the flow with her hand, crying out:

‘How could you? You should have killed me first!’

‘Don’t worry,’ said Bao-yu. ‘I’m going to show you my heart.’

He fumbled about inside the gaping flesh, while Dai-yu, shaking convulsively, afraid someone might burst in on them at any moment, pressed him to her tightly and wept bitterly.

‘Oh no!’ said Bao-yu. ‘It’s not there any more! My time has come!’

His eyes flickered and he fell with a dull thud to the floor. Dai-yu let out a piercing scream. She heard Nightingale calling her:

‘Miss Lin! Miss Lin! You’re having a nightmare! Wake up! Come along now, you must get undressed and go to sleep properly.’

Dai-yu turned over in her bed. So it had all been a nightmare. But she could still feel her throat choking, her heart was still pounding, the top of her pillow was drenched in sweat, and a tingly, icy sensation ran down her back and chilled her to the core.

‘Mother and father died long ago. Bao-yu and I have never been engaged,’ she thought to herself. ‘What ever could have made me have such a dream?’

The scenes of her dream passed before her eyes again. She was on her own in the world, she reflected. Supposing Bao-yu really died - what then? The thought was enough to bring back all the pain and confusion. She began to weep, and tiny beads of sweat broke out down the length of her body. Finally she struggled up, took off her outer robe and told Nightingale to make the bed. She lay down again, and began turning restlessly from side to side, unable to get to sleep. She could hear the gentle sighing of the wind outside her window - or was it the drizzle falling softly on the roof? Once, the sound died away and she thought she could hear someone calling in the distance. But it was only Nightingale, who had already fallen asleep and was snoring in a corner of the room. With a great effort, Dai-yu struggled out of bed, wrapped the quilt around her and sat up. An icy draught from a crack in the casement soon sent her shivering back under the covers again. She was just beginning to doze off when the Sparrows struck up their dawn-chorus from their nests in the bamboos. First light was gradually beginning to show through the shutters and paper window-panes.

Dai-yu was now wide awake again and started coughing. Nightingale awoke at once.

‘Still awake, Miss? Coughing too - it sounds as if you’ve caught a chill. Why, it’s almost light, it’ll soon be morning! Please try and stop thinking so much, and rest. You need to sleep.’

‘I want to sleep,’ replied Dai-yu. ‘But what’s the good? I just can’t. You go back to sleep anyway.’ These last words

were interrupted by another fit of coughing.

Nightingale was already distressed at her mistress's condition and had no inclination to go back to sleep. When she heard her coughing again, she hurried over to hold up the spittoon. By now it was dawn outside.

'Haven't you gone to sleep?' asked Dai-yu.

'Sleep?' replied Nightingale cheerfully. 'It's already day-light.'

'In that case, could you change the spittoon?'

'Certainly Miss.'

Leaving the full spittoon on a table in the outer room, Nightingale went promptly to fetch a fresh one, which she placed at the foot of the kang. Then, closing the door of the inner room carefully behind her and letting down the flower-patterned portiere~ she went out to wake Snow-goose, taking the full spittoon with her. When she came to empty it in the courtyard, and looked closer, she noticed to her horror some specks of blood in the phlegm.

'Goodness!' she blurted out. 'How awful!'

'What's the matter?' Dai-yu called out at 6nce from in-side.

'Oh nothing, Miss!'

Nightingale tried her best to cover up her blunder. 'The spittoon slipped in my hand and 4 nearly dropped it.'

'You didn't find anything odd in the phlegm?'

'Oh no, Miss.' A lump came into Nightingale's throat, and she could say no more. Tears came streaming down her cheeks.

Dai-yu had already noticed a sickly taste in her mouth, and her earlier suspicions were strengthened first by Nightingale's cry of alarm, and now by the unmistakable note of dismay in her voice.

'Come in,' she told Nightingale. 'It must be cold outside.'

'I'm coming, Miss.' She sounded more disconsolate than ever. Her tragic snuffly tone set Dai-yu shivering. The door opened and she walked in, still dabbing her eyes with a handkerchief.

'Come along now,' said Dai-yu. 'Crying so early in the morning.

'Who's crying?' said Nightingale, doing her best to smile. 'It's so early and my eyes are a bit itchy, that's all. You were awake longer than ever last night, weren't you, Miss? I could hear you coughing half the night.'

'I know. The more I wanted to sleep, the wider awake I became.'

'You're not well, Miss. I think all this worrying is ruining your health. And good health is like the hill in the proverb:

Keep the hill **green,** keep the hill **green,**
And you'll never lack fuel for winter again.

Besides, everyone here cares for you so. Her Old Ladyship does, Her Ladyship does, *everyone* does!'

How could Nightingale know that the mere mention of these homely names, intended to reassure and comfort, was enough to conjure up again the horror of the nightmare? Dai-yu felt her heart thumping, everything went black before her eyes, and she seemed on the point of fainting altogether. Nightingale quickly held out the spittoon while Snowgoose patted her lightly on the back. After a long while she coughed up another mouthful of phlegm. In it was a thick wriggling strand of dark **red** blood. The two maids were pale with fright. They stood supporting her, one on each side, until finally she slumped back, scarcely conscious. Nightingale, aware of the critical nature of her condition, looked at Snowgoose and made an urgent movement with her lips that clearly meant: 'Go and fetch someone - quickly!'

Snowgoose was no sooner out of the door than she saw Kingfisher and Ebony coming towards the Naiad's House, smiling as they walked along.

'Isn't Miss Lin up yet?' inquired Kingfisher cheerfully. 'My mistress and Miss Tan-chun are both round at

Miss Xi-chun's discussing her painting of the garden.'

Snowgoose hushed them both with a quick gesture.

'What's the matter?' they asked in alarm. Snowgoose told them all that had happened, and they shot out their tongues in horror.

'But that's serious! Why haven't you been to tell Her Old Ladyship? What a terrible thing! How could you be so silly!'

'I was on my way when you two arrived,' replied Snowgoose.

'Who's that talking outside?' called Nightingale from the bedroom. 'Miss Lin wants to know.'

The three of them went in together, to find Dai-yu lying wrapped up in bed.

'What's all the excitement about?' she asked them. 'Who's been telling you tales?'

It was Ebony who replied:

'Miss Tan-chun and Miss Xiang-yun have just gone over to Miss Xi-chun's to discuss her landscape of the garden, and they sent us here to ask you to join them, Miss Lin. We're sorry to hear that you're not well.'

'It's nothing serious,' said Dai-yu. 'I'm just feeling a bit weak, that's all. I'll be up when I've had a little rest. Will you tell Miss Tan-chun and Miss Xiang-yun that I should like them to come here after lunch, if they're not too busy? I don't suppose Master Bao's been over there, has he?'

'No, Miss,' came the reply. 'Master Bao has been going to school the last few days,' continued Ebony, 'and the Master tests him every day, so he doesn't get a chance to romp around as he used to.'

Dai-yu was silent and thoughtful. The two maids stood around for a minute or two longer and then discreetly withdrew.

At the Lotus Pavilion, Xi-chun's painting of Prospect Garden was being subjected to an aesthetic appraisal by Tan-chun and Xiang-yun. Too much here, not enough there, a little too thin in one place, too crowded in another. They were thinking of adding a poetry inscription, and had sent to ask for Dai-yu's advice. They were busily talking when Kingfisher and Ebony came back, looking very flustered. Xiang-yun was the first to question them:

'Why hasn't Miss Lin come with you?'

'She had a bad relapse last night, Miss,' replied King-fisher, 'and was up coughing most of the night. According to Snowgoose the phlegm it' her spittoon was flecked with blood.'

'Are you sure?' asked Tan-chun, aghast.

'Quite sure,' replied Kingfisher.

'We've just been in to see her, Miss,' said Ebony. 'She looks dreadful, and hardly has the strength to speak.'

'If she's as sick as *that*, she's hardly likely to be able to speak,' said Xiang-yun bluntly.

'What nonsense, Yun! Why if she couldn't speak that would mean she was .....

Tan-chun broke off in mid-sentence.

'Dai is a clever soul,' said Xi-chun. 'But she does have a tendency to take everything too seriously. If only she could see beyond it all.'

'We must go and see how she is, anyway,' said Tanchun. 'If it *is* serious, we'd better tell Cousin Wan and let Grannie know, so they can send for a doctor and find out what to do.'

Xiang-yun agreed, and she and Tan-chun set off with a couple of junior maids for the Naiad's House. Xi-chun said she would follow later.

The sight of the girls coming into her room gave Dai-yu a queer feeling, and set her brooding once more over her dream. If Grandmother Jia had proved so cold in the dream, wouldn't Tan and Yun have been even more so? Would they even have bothered to come and see her now, she wondered, if she had not made a point of asking them to? Not allowing these doubts to show, she made a big effort and told Nightingale to prop her up, murmuring to the others to sit down.

Tan-chun and Xiang-yun sat one at each end of the bed, deeply moved by the sight of Dai-yu in this condition.

'What do you think is the matter, Dai?' asked Tan-chun.

'Oh, it's nothing serious. I just feel so drained.'

Nightingale, who was standing on the other side of Daiyu, secretly pointed to the spittoon, and Xiang-yun (the younger and by nature less circumspect of the two girls) picked it up and had a look. It was too late:

'Ith thith *yourth,* Dai?' she asked in a voice of horror. 'How awful!'

Earlier Dai-yu had been too faint and overwrought to examine the contents of her spittoon. But now Xiangyun's question reawakened her suspicions. Her heart sank as she turned to look. Tan-chun tried to cover up for Xiang-yun:

'That only means you've got some inflammation on your lungs, and have brought a little up. It's quite common. Yun's so pathetic the way she goes on about the slightest thing!'

Xiang-yun blushed and wished she had never opened her mouth. Tan-chun could see how low Dai-yu's spirits were, and how tired she was. She rose to leave:

'You must rest and build up your strength. We'll leave you now and call back again later.'

'Thank you both for thinking of me.

'Mind you look after Miss Lin properly now, Nightingale.'

'Yes, Miss Tan-chun.'

They were about to leave, when the hushed atmosphere was rudely disturbed by a voice shouting outside. But if you wish to learn whose voice it was, you must turn to the next chapter.

CHAPTER 83

An Indisposition in the Imperial Bedchamber
calls for a Family Visitation
While insubordination in the inner apartments
reveals Bao-chai's long-suffering nature

It was told in our last chapter how Dai-yu's visitors, who were on the point of leaving, heard a voice outside the window crying:

'What's a little trouble-maker like you doing here in the garden anyway? You're nothing but a nuisance!'

Dai-yu immediately let out a great cry:

'I can't stay here any longer!'

She rolled her eyes and gestured with one hand in the direction of the window.

The truth is that after all this time, despite Grand-mother Jia's constant love and protection, Dai-yu still suffered from an acute sense of insecurity, of being an 'outsider in the Garden'. On this occasion, incredible though it may seem, she had instinctively taken herself to be the target of the old woman's abuse (for the voice was that of an old serving-woman), and had immediately set about reconstructing the 'plot' in her mind: someone, taking advantage of the fact that she was an orphan, had sent this woman to insult her in public. She was being persecuted! The sense of injury, the unfairness of it, were more than she could bear. Another fit of sobbing left her unconscious.

'What's the matter, Miss?' Nightingale was in tears herself. 'Please wake up!'

Tan-chun also called out in an effort to rouse her, and eventually Dai-yu came round. She could not speak, and

her only explanation was another gesture towards the window. Tan-chun understood. She opened the door and went outside, to discover the old woman, with a stick in her hand, chasing a scruffy little maid.
'I'm trying to get on with my gardening,' she was grumbling. 'You've no business to be here. Just wait till we get home and I get my hands on you! I'll learn you!'
The little girl merely cocked her head, stuck a finger in her mouth and stared at the old woman with a cheeky grin.
'Have you both taken leave of your senses?' exclaimed Tan-chun severely. 'How dare you use language like that here?'
When the old woman saw who it was, she pulled herself up smartly and answered with her most ingratiating smile:
'It's my daughter's girl here, Miss Tan-chun. She would follow me over you see, and I knew she'd only be a nuisance so I was shooing her along home. Dearie me, if I'd stopped to think where I was I'd never have dared raise my voice I'm sure.'
'That's quite enough,' said Tan-chun. 'Off you go both of you. Miss Lin is not feeling very well today - so hurry up and go!'
'Yes Miss! Straightaway Miss!' The old girl bustled off and her granddaughter went running after her.
Returning indoors, Tan-chun found Xiang-yun holding Dai-yu's hand and crying helplessly, while Nightingale was supporting her mistress with one hand and using her free hand to rub her chest. Slowly the life returned to Dai-yu's eyes and she looked up. Tan-chun smiled kindly:
'Did you take offence at what that old woman said?'
Dai-yu answered with a feeble shake of the head.
'It was her own granddaughter she was shouting at,' Tan-chun went on to explain. 'She told me all about it. People like her are the end. They never know when to hold their tongue.'
Dai-yu sighed and held Tan-chun's hand.
'Oh Tan...' she cried feebly, but could say no more.
'There, you mustn't start worrying,' said Tan-chun. 'We're cousins and cousins should stick by one another. That's why I came to see you. Besides, I know you're a bit short of help. Listen, all you have to do is take your medicine like a good girl and look on the bright side a bit, and you'll soon start to build up your strength. And then we can start having meetings of our poetry club again, and everything will be fine.'
'Tan's right,' echoed Xiang-yun. 'Won't that be fun!'
'Oh, if only you knew!' sobbed Dai-yu. 'I feel so weak. I don't think I'll ever pull through.'
'That's no way to talk,' said Tan-chun. 'We all fall ill, we all have our troubles. There's no cause for you to be so pessimistic. Be sensible and have a good rest now. Yun and I had better go over to Grannie's. We'll come and see you again later. If there's anything you need, tell Nightingale and I'll send it over for you.'
'Tan, when you see Grannie, you won't say I'm very ill, will you? Please!' Tears were streaming down Dai-yu's face as she spoke. 'Just curtsey for me and say I'm not feeling very well but it's nothing serious and she's not to worry.

'Of course. Now don't fuss. Just rest and get better.' Tan-chun and Xiang-yun went on their way.

When they had gone, Nightingale settled Dai-yu down once more. She left all the fetching and carrying to Snow-goose, and herself stayed constantly at Dai-yu's side, trying her best not to betray her own distress by shedding any more tears. Dai-yu closed her eyes and lay still for a while. But sleep would not come. The garden outside, which had always been such a haven of quiet and solitude, now seemed alive with sounds - the wind, insects buzzing, birds chattering, the fall of human footsteps, children crying faintly in the distance - all of which drifted in through the window and set her nerves on edge. She told Nightingale to let down the curtains around

her bed.
Presently Snowgoose appeared, carrying before her in both hands a bowl of Bird's Nest Soup, which she gave to Nightingale, who whispered through the curtains:
'Would you like some soup, Miss?'
A faint 'yes' was heard from inside, and handing the soup back to Snowgoose for the moment, Nightingale climbed up and helped Dai-yu into a comfortable sitting position. Turning to take the bowl again, she first tasted the contents herself, then held it carefully to Dai-yu's lips, while supporting her firmly round the shoulder with one arm. Dai-yu opened her eyes feebly, took a couple of sips, then showed by a shake of her head that she could not manage any more. Nightingale handed the bowl back to Snowgoose and gently settled her down again.
For a few minutes all was quiet and Dai-yu seemed more peaceful. Then a whisper was heard from outside the window:
'Is Nightingale in?'
Snowgoose hurried out. It was Aroma.
'Come in,' she whispered.
'How's Miss Lin?' asked Aroma.
They walked together towards the doorway and Aroma listened aghast as Snowgoose described what had happened that morning and the preceding night.
'No wonder!' she exclaimed. 'Kingfisher said something of the sort just now and had Master Bao so worried that he sent me straight round to find out how she is.'
As they were talking, Nightingale lifted the portiere and beckoned to Aroma, who tiptoed into the room:
'Is Miss Lin asleep?'
Nightingale nodded. 'Has Snowgoose told you?' she added.
Aroma nodded, then frowned and said:
'This is dreadful! Master Bao had me worried to death last night too!'
'What do you mean?' asked Nightingale. Aroma explained:
'When he went to sleep in the evening he seemed perfectly all right. But in the middle of the night he started screaming his head off**,** first about a pain in his heart, and then about being stabbed by a knife - he was quite delirious, and didn't quieten down till after the dawn watch. Wouldn't you have been scared? He's not allowed to go to school today, and the doctor has been sent for to prescribe something for him.'
While they were talking, Dai-yu could be heard coughing again from inside the bed-curtains, and Nightingale hurried over to hold up the spittoon. Dai-yu opened her eyes feebly:
'Who's that you're talking to?'
'It's Aroma, Miss. She's come to ask how you are.
Aroma was already standing close by the bed. Dai-yu told Nightingale to help her up and gestured to Aroma to sit down on the bed. Aroma perched on the edge and said in her best bedside manner:
'Are you sure you ought to be sitting up like this, Miss?'
'Why not?' replied Dai-yu. 'Stop behaving as if it's the end of the world, will you? Who was that you mentioned just now, with a pain in the heart during the night?'
'Oh that wasn't *real!'* said Aroma. 'That was just a nightmare Master Bao had.'
'It's very thoughtful of Aroma,' thought Dai-yu to herself. 'I know she's only trying to stop me from worrying. But I *must* know!' She tried again, more insistently this time:
'What sort of a nightmare? What did he say?'
'Oh, he didn't say anything,' lied Aroma.
Dai-yu nodded pensively and fell silent for a minute or two. Then she sighed again and said:
'Y6u're none of you to mention my illness to Master Bao. It might affect his work and cause trouble with Sir Zheng.'

‘Of course we won’t, Miss,’ Aroma reassured her. ‘Now you lie down and rest.’
Dai-yu nodded and asked Nightingale to settle her down again. Aroma stayed a little longer by her bedside, said a few more comforting words and then left. When she arrived back at **Green** Delights she reported that Dai-yu was feeling a little uncomfortable but that her condition was not a serious one, and thereby succeeded in setting Bao-yu’s mind at rest.

Tan-chun and Xiang-yun, on leaving the Naiad’s House, made their way together to Grandmother Jia’s apartment. As they went, Tan-chun warned Xiang-yun:
‘When we see Grandmother, please be more careful what you say, will you?’
Xiang-yun nodded:
‘I will. I’m afraid just now I was too shocked by Dai’s state to think what I was doing.’
They arrived at Grandmother Jia’s and Tan-chun mentioned Dai-yu’s illness. As she had predicted, the old lady was somewhat ruffled:
‘Dear dh dear! How illness and misfortune seem to pick on those two! Ever since Dai-yu was a little girl, it’s been one thing after another. Now that she’s grown up, it is time she learned to take better care of her health. She’s too highly strung, that’s her trouble.’
No one dared say anything. She turned to Faithful:
‘The doctor’s coming in the morning to see Bao-yu. Tell them he’s to look in at Miss Lin’s afterwards.’
‘Yes, ma’am.’
Faithful went out to tell the serving-women, who passed on the instructions. Tan-chun and Xiang-yun stayed on at Grandmother Jia’s for dinner, and then returned to the Garden together.

Next day the doctor came to see Bao-yu. He pronounced that a dietary imbalance had brought on a slight chill, which would soon be put right by a mild dispersant. Lady Wang and Xi-feng sent the prescription over for Grandmother Jia to inspect, and at the same time sent someone ahead to the Naiad’s House to let them know the doctor was on his way. Nightingale tucked Dai-yu up in her quilt and let down the bed-curtains, while Snowgoose quickly tidied the room.
Presently Jia Lian arrived with the doctor, announcing that as it was their regular practitioner there was no need for the maids to disappear. An old serving-woman raised the portiere, Jia Lian ushered the doctor into Dai-yu’s room and the two men sat down. Jia Lian began:
‘Nightingale dear, please tell Doctor Wang what you can about your mistress’s illness.’
‘Excuse me,’ interposed the doctor. ‘Please allow me to take her pulses and reach my own diagnosis first. Then the young ladies may judge for themselves and correct me if anything I say conflicts with what they already know of her condition’
Nightingale arranged Dai-yu so that one of her hands was showing through the bed-curtains and resting on the diagnostic arm-rest, and gently slid back her bracelet and sleeve so as not to obstruct the pulse. The doctor sat for a long while feeling the pulses first of one hand, then of the other. When he had finished, he withdrew with Jia Lian to the outer room, where they both sat down.
‘The six pulses have an extremely taut quality,’ said the doctor, ‘and indicate an advanced morbid obstruction.’
As he spoke, Nightingale appeared in the doorway. He turned towards her and said:

‘This condition should manifest itself in the following ways: dizzy spells, loss of appetite, frequent dreams, and fitful sleeping in the early hours; during the daytime a tendency to take offence for no reason and a generally nervous and apprehensive attitude towards other people. Some might attribute all these to a peculiarity of temperament, but they would be mistaken. They are organically related t6 a deficiency of Yin in the liver, with a

concomitant diminution of cardiac vitality. Does my diagnosis accord with what you have observed?'
Nightingale nodded, and turning to Jia Lian said: 'That is exactly how Miss Lin has been, sir.
'Good,' said Doctor Wang, rising from his chair. 'We may proceed.'
Jia Lian escorted him out of the Garden and across to his study, where his pages had already laid out the requisite **pink** prescription form in readiness. Tea was served, then Doctor Wang took up the brush and wrote:

DIAGNOSIS
The six pulses are slow and taut. Prolonged morbid obstruction of the humoral flow.
Left distal pulse weak. Diminution of cardiac vitality.
Left median pulse strong and irregular. Hyperactivity of the liver *(Wood).*
The hepatic humour, unable to disperse naturally, has encroached upwards on the spleen *(Earth)*, with consequent loss of appetite. The extreme distemper has also caused a reversal of the elemental sequence, and the lungs *(Metal)* have certainly been damaged.
Since humour cannot circulate, it has congealed into phlegm. Upsurge and expectoration of blood.

TREATMENT
1. Sedation of liver.
2. Restoration of lungs.
3. Fortification of both heart and spleen.

The usual tonics are too violent in their action. For the present, I suggest my own *Black Ethereal Essence*, to be taken with *Elixir Pneumoferriferum.* Prescriptions for both humbly appended for esteemed approval.

The doctor wrote out a prescription of seven items and an adjuvant to go with it. Jia Lian took the paper and glanced down the list.
'I see you include Hare's Ear in your prescription,' he said. 'Forgive me if I am wrong, but I thought that was ruled out in haematic eruptions?'
'You must be thinking,' replied Doctor Wang with a knowledgeable smile, 'of its emetic properties, which, as is well known, contra-indicate this particular herb in cases of haemoptysis or epistaxis. But allow me to inform you that in preparation with Turtle's Blood (as in my prescription), Hare's Ear constitutes the only effective remedy we have for draining the humour of the Lesser Yang periphery of the gall-bladder. You see, the judicious admixture of Turtle's Blood has the remarkable effect of inhibiting the emetic properties of Hare's Ear, while enabling it to restore the hepatic Yin and check the phlogistic disturbance. In the words of the *Ars Medicandi; "ObstruFta obstruit, aperitque aperta."* And the - at first sight - paradoxical inclusion of Hare's Ear is none other than the classic stratagem of the loyal counsellor befriending the usurper...
'I see,' said Jia Lian, nodding appreciatively. 'Thank you for enlightening me, Doctor Wang.'
The doctor continued:
'I should like the young lady to take two doses of the decoction, and then we shall see whether to alter the prescription, or perhaps try a new one altogether. I have another appointment, so I hope you'll excuse me. I shall call again another day.'
As Jia Lian saw him out, he asked:
'And what have you prescribed for my cousin?'
'Oh there's very little the matter with *him.* Another dose of the dispersant I have prescribed should put him right.'
With these words Doctor Wang stepped into his carriage.
Jia Lian dispatched a servant to purchase the various drugs needed and went in to inform Xi-feng of Dai-yu's diagnosis. They had not been talking long when Zhou Rui's wife arrived to consult Xi-feng about a few trivial details of domestic management. After listening for a while, Jia Lian rose to leave.

‘Carry on, Mrs Zhou, I must be going.’

With Jia Lian out of the room, and all remaining household business soon disposed of, Zhou Rui’s wife was able to come to the real purpose of her visit.

‘I’ve just come from Miss Lin’s, ma’am. I don’t like the look of it at all! There’s not a spot of colour left in her cheeks, and to touch her she’s nothing but skin and bones. I tried asking her what the matter was, but she wouldn’t speak, just sat there crying. Before I left, Nightingale asked if you could advance them a couple of months’ allowance. She said that with Miss Lin so ill, and her so proud anyway about not being beholden to a soul for anything, she’d made bold to ask about it herself. The medicine Miss Lin is taking goes on the general account of course, but she said they might be needing some extra money for incidental expenses. I said I’d mention it to you, ma’am.’

Xi-feng lowered her head for a moment, then replied:

‘Oh very well, I’ll sen4 her a few taels to be going on with. There’s no need to tell Miss Lin though. I’m against advances on principle. If one person starts we’ll never hear the end of it. Do you remember the scene Mrs Zhao and Miss Tan-chun had about this very question? Besides, as you know, with so many expenses and so little coming in to pay for them, things are extremely tight at present.’

After a pause, she continued:

‘Some people are under the illusion that it’s all caused by bad management on my part. Some even have the nerve to suggest that I am lining the Wang nest at the Jia family’s expense. But you know better, my dear Mrs Zhou. You’ve seen far too much of what really goes on to pay any attention to such gossip.’

‘Why I never heard such downright wicked lies in all my days, ma’am,’ said Zhou Rui’s wife. ‘Bless my soul! Where would this great rambling household be now, I should like to know, without you to keep everything running smoothly the way you do? I’d like to see any other lady try to take it on. Why, a grown man with six arms and three heads would crumple under the strain of what you have to bear, for certain sure! There’s no justice left in this world!’

Suddenly she broke into a cackle of laughter.

‘Mind you, Mrs Lian, the things people *will* say! The other day when Mr Zhou came home from town, he told me how people are all talking about us, trying to guess just how rich the family is. Take this for example: "The Jias have got rooms piled high with silver and gold! Every stick of furniture in the house is inlaid with gold and studded with precious stones!" Or sometimes they gossip about Her Grace: "That daughter of theirs at Court," they’ll say, "you can bet your last buckle she’s managed to smuggle home half the Emperor’s things. That time she went on that grand visitation, we saw it with our own eyes - cartloads of gold and silver she brought along with her, had the old home twinkling away like a fairy palace…And when the family laid on that big do at the Temple (which must have cost them a fortune), they didn’t bat an eyelid! Those lions outside the main gate are solid jade, and they’ve a golden kylin in the garden - used to be two, till one was stolen! You’d expect the ladies to be grand of course: but in that set-up the maids are quite as genteel and ladylike as the ladies themselves! They never do a hand’s turn, just lounge around drinking wine, playing music or perhaps a little chess, or doing a spot of leisurely painting now and then... There’s never any shortage of others to do their work. All they need fuss about is which silk gown to slip into next. If you could see the delicacies they eat or the clothes they wear, you wouldn’t believe your eyes. And the children! So pampered, if they were to ask for a moonbeam someone would be off to fetch it down for the pretty little darlings to play with!" There’s even a song about us:

Moneybags Ning
And Rolling Rong
Treat their cash
Like piles of dung.
It seems so fine, But please beware! If you look too...

Mrs Zhou broke off in mid flow. The last two lines of her song were in fact:

If yoli look too close, The cupboard's bare!

She had been so carried away with her rendition that she only stopped in the nick of time. Xi-feng could tell that the song carried a sting in its tail.
'I know the sort of thing,' she remarked casually. 'But what could have given rise to that story about the golden kylin?'
'They must mean the little one old Abbot Zhang gave Master Bao at the Temple,' replied Mrs Zhou. 'He lost it and then several days later young Miss Shi found it for him. A little thing like that is quite enough for those townfolk to spin one of their yarns around! They're so ridiculous, aren't they, Mrs Lian? The only thing one can do is laugh.'
'I can't say I find it particularly funny,' replied Xi-feng. 'It's actually rather frightening. The trouble is that behind our magnificent facade things are going from bad to worse. There's a popular saying:

Fattest pigs make choicest bacon;
Famous men are for the taking.

And our fame has been won under false pretences anyway. Sometimes I worry a great deal where all this will lead to.'
'I understand your concern, ma'am,' said Mrs Zhou. 'But talk like that has been going round town for over a year, in the teahouses and wineshops, in every alley-way. It's too late to stop it now, isn't it?'
Xi-feng nodded. She told Patience to weigh out a few taels of silver and gave them to Mrs Zhou.
'Take these to Nightingale. Say it's just a little extra from me to help out. If she needs to make any purchases out of common funds, she mustn't be afraid to say so. No more talk of advances, though. I know Nightingale is a bright girl and will understand what I mean. Tell her that when I've a free moment I'll be over to see Miss Lin.'
Zhou Rui's wife took the money and departed to carry out these instructions.
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No sooner had Jia Lian left xi-feng closeted with Zhou Rui's wife than he was accosted by a page-boy with an urgent summons from his father, and was obliged to go straight over to Jia She's apartment.

'I've just got wind of the fact that someone at Court is ill,' Jia She explained. 'A senior consultant and two orderlies from the College of Physicians have been summoned to the palace, which indicates an illness in His Majesty's immediate entourage. Tell me, have we had any news of Her Grace the past few days?'
'None,' replied Lian.
'Go and ask your uncle, and check with Cousin Zhen,' said Jia She. 'See if they know any more about it. If not, then send someone to inquire at the College. We must find out what is going on.'
'Yes, father.'
Jia Lian pursued both lines of inquiry simultaneously, dispatching one of his men to the College, while he him-self set off in haste to find Jia Zheng.
'Where did you hear of this?' asked Jia Zheng, after listening to Lian's account of the story.
'From father, just a minute ago.'
'Well, you and Cousin Zhen had better go straight to the Palace and see what information you can glean there.'
'I have already sent someone to the College,' replied Lian, 'to see if there is any news. I'll go to the Ning side

and fetch Cousin Zhen.'
He had no need to. go as far as Ning-guo House, however, since Cousin Zhen was already on his way over.
'Yes, I'd heard the same rumour myself,' remarked Zhen, as Lian told him the story and the two of them walked together towards Jia Zheng's study. 'I was just on my way to consult your father and Uncle Zheng about it.'
By the time they arrived, Jia Zheng's attitude had become somewhat more philosophical.
'If it *is* Her Grace,' he advised them, 'we are sure to be informed sooner or later.'
Meanwhile Jia She had joined the gathering.
At noon, the four of them were still waiting for Jia Lian's messenger to return with news from the College, when one of the janitors came in to report the arrival of two Palace Eunuchs, with an Imperial Communication for Sir She and Sir Zheng.
'Show them in,' ordered Jia She, and he and his brother went out to greet them at the inner gate. They knelt Manchu-style and did homage as 'Her Grace's most Humble Servants', before ushering the Imperial delegation through the gateway and across the courtyard to the main reception-hall, where they begged them both to be seated. One of the eunuchs rose to his feet and said:
'Your daughter, Her Grace the Imperial Concubine, having been somewhat indisposed of late, it is His Majesty's Pleasure that four ladies of her family should visit the Imperial Bedchamber tomorrow. Each lady is to be permitted a single maidservant in attendance. Male relatives are to proceed as far as the Inner Gate and present their cards. They may not proceed any further but are to do homage an4 await any further instructions outside the gate. Appointed time of arrival is nine a. m., departure to be completed by five p.m.'
Jia Zheng and Jia She and all the others present received this edict standing. When it was concluded, they sat down once more and offered the eunuchs tea, after which the Imperial party took its leave. The two senior brothers saw them out as far as the main gate, and then went in to report to Grandmother Jia.
'Four?' queried the old lady. 'Your two ladies and myself makes three. Who can the fourth place be for?'
There was a momentary pause. No one dared make a suggestion, and after a moment's reflection Grandmother J ia continued: 'It must be meant for Feng. She knows how to cope with any situation. Well, you menfolk go off and make your arrangements.'
Leaving promptly, Jia She and Jia Zheng gave instructions that apart from Lian and Rong whose job it would be to stay and look after the two mansions, a full turn-out of junior and senior clan-members was expected. Next the servants were told to fit out four of the family's best **green** court-sedans, and a dozen carriages with **blue** canopies, and have them lined up before first light in the morning. The servants hurried about their business, while the two Masters returned for a final consultation with Lady Jia.
'We have to be there at nine o'clock, and leave at five, Mother. It seems advisable to retire rather earlier than usual tonight if we are to make a prompt start in the morning. We need to allow ourselves ample time to prepare for court.'
'Very well,' replied Grandmother Jia. 'You can go now.
The brothers withdrew, leaving Grandmother Jia with her two daughters-in-law and Xi-feng. TheY talked for a while about Yuan-chun's illness, and then after a little more desultory chat, retired for the night.
Next morning, before dawn, maids lit the lamps in every apartment, and the ladies sat down to their toilet. At five o'clock, when the ladies were ready and the gentlemen had put the finishing touches to their ceremonial outfits, Steward Lin and Lai Da came to the Inner Gate to report that the chairs and carriages were all ready as ordered and had been drawn up outside. Jia She and Lady
Xing arrived, and the party was complete. After breakfast, which they all took together, Lady Jia led them out, leaning on Xi-feng's arm, and the household gathered round as the four ladies, each accompanied by a single maid, walked slowly out. An advance party, consisting of Li Gui and one other senior boy, went on horseback to make preliminary arrangements at the Outer Gate of the Palace. Three generations of Jias stepped into their carriages or mounted their horses. The procession fell into line and, with retainers swelling the train, set off

through the streets. Jia Lian and Jia Rong remained behind to look after the two mansions.
The procession came to a halt under Westwall Gate, one of the outer gates of the Forbidden City, and shortly afterwards two eunuchs emerged to announce:
'By Imperial Dispensation! The ladies of the Jia family will now enter the Palace for their Personal Visitation. The gentlemen may also proceed but may not enter the Palace precincts. They will halt at the Inner Gate and do their homage from there.'
There was a cry of *'Forward!'* from the men on the gate, and a junior eunuch guided the four ladies' chairs onward, while the gentlemen followed on foot at a stately pace, leaving their servants at the Outer Gate. As they approached the Inner Gate, they could see several elderly eunuchs sitting there, who rose to their feet as the procession arrived and announced:
'Gentlemen of the Jia family! Halt here!'
Jia She and Jia Zheng lined their men up outside the Gate in order of seniority, while the ladies passed through in their chairs, halted under the Gate and dismounted. A new escort of junior eunuchs now presented itself, and the Jia ladies, each leaning on a maid's arm, continued on foot through the inner precincts of the Palace, until they saw before them the lavishly ornamented facade and brilliantly glazed roof-tiles of the Imperial Concubine's Bedchamber.
Two young ladies-in-waiting stepped forward to inform them that the only formality required would be a curtsey. Expressing their humble appreciation for this favour?, the visitors approached the bed and curtseyed in turn. Yuanchun bade them be seated, which they did after a polite show of reluctance. She spoke first to Grandmother Jia:
'Have you been keeping well?'
Leaning on her maid, the old lady rose shakily to her feet and replied:
'Thanks to Your Grace's beneficent aura I am still in good health.'
Yuan-chun went on to speak to Lady Wang and Lady Xing, who both rose to answer in similar fashion. Then she turned to Xi-feng:
'How are things at home?'
Xi-feng rose to her feet.
'We manage to get by, Your Grace,' she replied, and sat down.
'I appreciate,' said Yuan-chun, 'that it has not been easy for you these past few years.'
Xi-feng was about to rise again and reply when a lady-in-waiting entered with a lot of official cards for Her Grace's inspection. As she recognized the familiar names, Yuan-chun felt a bitter pang of grief and tears began to flow down her cheeks. The lady-in-waiting proferred a silk handkerchief, which she used to wipe away her tears, saying:
'I am a litde better today, please tell them. And bid them wait outside.'
The Jia ladies were once more on their feet and expressing their gratitude. Yuan-chun's eyes were still wet with tears.
'Humble families are so much luckier than we are! At least they can be together!'
Lady Jia and the others were also on the brink of tears.
'We beseech Your Grace not to be sad. Your exalted blessings have already made themselves felt a thousandfold at home.'
'How is Bao-yu coming along?' asked Yuan-chun.
'He is taking his studies more seriously now,' replied Lady J ia. 'His father has been extremely strict with him, and he is turning into quite a little scholar.'
'I am so glad to hear that.'
Yuan-chun gave orders for their luncheon to be served in the outer reception-hall, and two ladies-in-waiting, assisted by four junior eunuchs, escorted them out. The seating had been arranged in accordance with Jia family

precedence, and the ladies sat down to an immaculately presented meal, details of which our narrative omits. When luncheon was over, the four ladies returned to give thanks. After further desultory chat, they saw that it was nearly five o'clock, and anxious not to overstep their limit, took their leave. Yuan-chun sent one of her ladiesin-waiting to accompany them as far as the Inner Gate, where the same four eunuchs were waiting to guide them out. Lady Jia and company stepped into their chairs and were carried to the Outer Gate, where they were joined by Jia She and the menfolk. The whole family returned in procession together.

The Visitation was repeated the following day and the day after, and as the arrangements made were identical to the last detail, we need not elaborate any further here.

Meanwhile, in the Xue household, things were going from bad to worse. Ever since Xue Pan's disappearance, Jin-gui had felt the lack of a sparring partner. Caltrop (Lily) had moved out to live with Bao-chai, and the only person left within range was Moonbeam. But since her promotion to the Master's bed, Moonbeam had acquired a new selfassurance, and Jin-gui soon observed that her stratagem in giving Moonbeam to Pan had misfired. Her maid had indeed become her strongest rival. 'Very well,' she thought to herself one day, when she had been drinking heavily and was lying on her kang in a maudlin frame of mind, let's see what she's worth...' A round or two with Moonbeam might be just the seltzer she needed.

'Come on!' she taunted her. 'Where's our precious Lord and Master disappeared to, eh? Where's he hiding? You do know, of course, don't you?'

'I've not the least idea,' replied Moonbeam coolly. 'If he wouldn't tell you, Mrs Pan, no one else is likely to know.'

'Spare me the "Mrs", will you!' said Jin-gui with a malicious smile. 'You and that Lily think you run the place, don't you? I can't get near that little Miss Unmolestable, with all her friends in high places to take care of her - all right! I won't stick my neck out in that direction! But you're still my maid, I don't have to take cheek from *you!* If you're so sure of yourself, why not get on with it and strangle me? Then you and Lily can have the field to yourselves. I'm just in your way - go on, say it!'

Moonbeam wasn't taking this lying down. She looked J in-gui straight in the eye:

'Mrs Pan, you have no right to accuse me like that! When have I ever said a word against you? Just because you can't do anything to *her,* there's no need to take it **Out** on *me!* You're just being a bully! You know what the real trouble is, so why pretend you don't?'

She burst into floods of tears and Jin-gui, who was now back in her element, clambered fuming down from the kang and went after her. Moonbeam had learned a thing or two in the Xia household and fought back every inch of the way. Jin-gui, ignoring her cries and protestations of innocence, attacked her with whatever she could lay hands on, and chairs, tables, cups and bowls were soon flying in every direction.

Aunt Xue happened to be in Bao-chai's room and heard the terrible racket they were making.

'Caltrop,' she ordered without thinking, 'go over and see what's going on, will you? Try and get them to quieten down.'

'You can't possibly send Caltrop,' Bao-chai reminded her. 'That would only make things worse.

'Very well then, I shall go myself,' declared Aunt Xue.

'I don't think you should, Mama,' advised Bao-chai. 'We shall have to let them fight it out. There's nothing we can do, I'm afraid.'

'What an intolerable state of affairs!' cried Aunt Xue, and leaning on one of her maids she set off in the direction of Jin-gui's apartment. Bao-chai followed reluctantly giving Caltrop strict tructions to stay behind. As they approached Jin-gui's apartment, they could hear the storm continuing unabated inside.

'What's the meaning of this?' cried Aunt Xue. 'Look at the state things are in! What a disgraceful way to behave!

Other people can hear what goes on, you know. Aren't you ashamed of what our relatives will think? Aren't you afraid of being made a laughing-stock?'

'Me a laughing-stock - that's rich!' Jin-gui yelled from inside. 'It's this topsy-turvy family of yours that's a laughing-stock.There's no respect, no proper order, not a single thing right in this godforsaken dump! I was brought up differently, I can tell you! In my home people knew their place. I've had as much from you family as I can take!"

'Sister-in-law;' pleaded Bao-chai, 'Mother only came because she heard the two of you fighting. If she seemed to be blaming you, and didn't distinguish between you and Moonbeam, it's only because she was upset. I'm sure she didn't mean anything by it. Wouldn't it be better to explain whatever it is that's troubling you, and all of us try to get along peaceably together? Poor Mother, we're worrying her to death.'

'Yes,' added Aunt Xue, 'before you start accusing me, kindly explain what the trouble is.'

'You're such a saint, aren't you!' said Jin-gui, addressing herself to Bao-chai. 'I'm sure a fine lady like you will marry a gentleman and live in a nice home - not like me, stranded here, trampled under foot, taken advantage of by all and sundry! I might as well be a widow! What a fool I am! Don't judge me too harshly. I'm only. a poor father-less creature that's never been taught any better. And I'm sure you'd rather I spared you the sordid details of what goes on in here between my husband and his various womenfolk!'

Only the thought of what her mother must be suffering enabled Bao-chai to contain her intense anger and shame at these words.

'Sister-in-law,' she pleaded, 'please don't say any more. No one is judging you, no one is taking advantage of you - we never did with Lily and of course we don't with you.'

At this Jin-gui started whacking the side of the kang and shrieked at the top of her voice:

'Lily! How could I ever compare with her? I'm not worth the ground she treads on, am I? She's been here longer than I have, she understands you and knows how to butter you up, and I don't, I'm just a newcomer! I know! There's no need to remind me of it! But remember we can't all be Imperial Concubines; you'd better watch' your step and make sure you don't end up like me, married to a great half-baked booby, left in the lurch for all the world to mock at!'

Aunt Xue could contain herself no longer and rose to her feet:

'I am not just defending her because she is my daughter; she has tried her best to make peace with you but you seem quite determined to provoke her. Whatever your trouble is, leave the poor girl alone! If you have to punish someone, why not strangle me instead?'

'Please don't you get angry too, Mama,' begged Baochai. 'We only came to try and help. If all we're going to do is make things worse, I honestly think we should go. Let's give her time to think it all over. And don't *you* go causing any more trouble either!' This last remark was addressed to Moonbeam.

And so the two of them left and returned to their own apartment. As they crossed the courtyard, they saw one of Lady Jia's personal maids coming out to greet them with Caltrop.

'Which way did you come?' asked Aunt Xue, adding: 'I hope Lady Jia is well.'

'Very well, thank you ma'am,' replied the maid. 'Her Old Ladyship asked me t9 send you her best regards, to thank you for the lychees you sent the other day, and to congratulate Miss Qin on her engagement.'

'How long have you been here?' asked Bao-chai. 'Quite a time,' was her reply. The colour rose in Aunt Xue's cheeks when she realized how much the maid must have overheard.

'I'm afraid we've been having some dreadful scenes here recently,' she said. 'We must be a laughing-stock over on your side.'

'Oh ma'am, it's nothing serious,' said the maid. 'Every family has its little troubles. That's as natural as plates clinking in a picnic-hamper. You're worrying too much.'

She went inside with them and sat for a while before returning to Grandmother Jia's.

A moment or two later, Bao-chai was busy giving Caltrop s9me instructions when suddenly Aunt Xue cried

out:

'Ai! My chest!'

She lay down on the kang, sending Bao-chai and Caltrop into a great state of panic. But if you wish to know the outcome, you must turn to the next chapter.

CHAPTER 84

Bao-yu is given an impromptu examination,
and his betrothal is discussed for the first time
Jia Huan visits a convulsive child,
and old hostilities are resumed

Bao-chai diagnosed her mother's sudden pain as an upward movement of humour from the liver into the chest, brought on by the recent scene with Jin-gui. Without waiting for a doctor, she sent a servant out instantly to buy a few drams of Woody Vine Hooks, and made a strong brew for Aunt Xue to drink. Then Caltrop helped administer a leg-pummelling and chest-massage. The pain eased a little; but Aunt Xue's anger at Jin-gui's outrageous behaviour, and her distress that Bao-chai should have had to submit to such humiliation, continued unabated.

Eventually, after another dose of daughterly reasoning, she fell asleep, and the humour was given a chance to subside.

'Now please don't worry any more, Mama,' pleaded Bao-chai, when she awoke. 'In a day or two, when you feel up to it, why not go over and see Lady Jia and Aunt Wang? It would do you a world of good. Caltrop and I can take care of things here while you're away. And I'm sure there will be no more trouble from *her*.'

Aunt Xue nodded.

'Perhaps I will in a couple of days.'

The news finally arrived that Yuan-chun had recovered, and everyone in the Jia family was greatly relieved. A day or two later a party of eunuchs arrived from the palace with a consignment of presents and parcels of money. They announced that it. was Her Grace's wish to reward the family for the diligence they had shown in visiting her during her Indisposition. The eunuchs handed over the carefully labelled gifts one by one. Jia She, Jia Zheng and the other menfolk went in to report to Grandmother Jia, and then all returned to express their thanks {or the largesse. When the eunuchs had drunk their tea and gone, there was a family gathering in Grandmother Jia's apartment. After a few minutes, while they were still chatting, an old serving-woman came in with a message:

'The pages have reported that there's a visitor at the other side on important business for Sir She, milady.'

With Grandmother Jia's permission, Jia She left to see to his own affairs. When he had gone, she suddenly thought of something and her face lit up with a smile.

'It's so touching,' she said, turning to Jia Zheng, 'the way Her Grace remembers Bao-yu! The other day she made a point of asking about him.'

'Her solicitude,' replied Jia Zheng with a sarcastic smile, 'is as generous as it is undeserved. Increasing idleness is the only fruit *that* young tree will ever bear.'

'But I gave him a glowing report!' protested Grandmother Jia. 'I said how well he was doing at his composi-

tions.'

'I only wish it were the truth,' said Jia Zheng with a crushing smile.

'But you and your friends are always asking him to write verses and things for you - I'm sure he's making progress, whatever you say. He's still young, be patient with him. "A single spoonful never made a bouncing babe," as the saying goes.'

Jia Zheng affected a dutiful smile.

'Yes, Mother.'

'Which brings me,' the old lady continued, 'to the other thing I want to talk about. Now that Bao-yu is growing up, it's time you and his mother started thinking seriously of choosing a nice wife for him. Marriage is going to be a most important step in his life. We needn't worry too much how, closely related to us she is, or how much money they've got; but we must be sure that she's sweet-natured, and a pretty sort of girl.'

'Thank you for reminding me, Mother,' replied Jia Zheng rather stiffly. 'But although of course I appreciate the importance of choosing a suitable bride, the first step, as I see it, must lie with Bao-yu himself. Without a marked improvement on his part, any alliance we might hope to arrange would be doomed, and would certainly be a regrettable error for the young lady concerned. His present shiftless attitude can only spell matrimonial disaster.'

His response did not please Grandmother Jia.

- 'I know that it's your decision!' she replied testily, 'and that I'm an interfering old busybody! But let me say just this: even if I *did* rather spoil him when he was little, and even if he *isn't* quite as grown-up and responsible as you think he ought to be, I still think he has always been a nice, well-mannered, honest boy. I think you're quite wrong to treat him as a ne'er-do-well, or as some sort of threat to a young girl's happiness. He's not like that at all. Oh perhaps I *am* prejudiced! He's preferable to young Huan, anyway. Or would you like to correct me there as well?'

Jia Zheng was by now feeling extremely uncomfortable. 'You are of course by far the more experienced judge of character, Mother,' he replied swiftly. 'You may be right in thinking that fate has favoured him. Perhaps it is my own - how shall I put it. - impatience to detect a sense of *purpose* in the lad that has made of me a crabbed old father, and of Bao-yu the - eh - "crab-apple of my eye"?'

The labour required on his part in the manufacture of this sparkling piece of verbal merriment did not quite nullify its object, viz. the humouring of the old lady, and she smiled, whereupon the other ladies contributed a polite round of laughter.

'Yes,' said Grandmother Jia, 'and don't forget how much older you are. It's that and your experience as a civil servant that have made you so mellow and wise.

She turned to Lady Xing and Lady Wang with a formidable glance and went on mischievously:

'If you could have seen *him* when *he* was a boy! He was quite impossible! *Far* worse than Bao-yu! It was only marriage that taught him a thing or two about life. And now he won't stop complaining about poor Bao. If anything, the boy is more mature for his age than his father was.'

The ladies thought this assault on the bastion of Jia Zheng's' dignity a great joke, and started laughing and calling Grandmother Jia a tease. Then the junior maids came in and informed Faithful that lunch was ready to be served.

'Speak up!' called out Grandmother Jia, her good humour quite restored. 'Let me in on the secret!'

Faithful smiled and passed on the message.

'Well in that case,' 'said Grandmother Jia, 'everyone can go home for lunch, except Feng and Cousin Zhen's wife. I'd like them to stay and keep me company.

Jia Zheng, Lady Wang and Lady Xing waited until lunch was served and then, after a few more prods from the old lady, they left and went their separate ways.

On their return, Jia Zheng, in the course of conversation with Lady Wang, brought up the subject of his recent contretemps with Grandmother Jia:

'How Mother idolizes that boy! If only he can do well enough to scrape through his exam, then she will' have something to feel proud of, a return for all her love, and he will have something to offer in the event of his marriage.'

'How true!' concurred Lady Wang.

Jia Zheng sent a maid out at once with the following orders for Li Gui:

'Tell Bao-yu I wish to see him this evening. Instead of coming to see me after school, he is to have his dinner first and come straight to my study afterwards. There are some questions I wish to put to him.'

Li Gui intercepted Bao-yu on his way home from school that afternoon, just as he was about to go in and pay his respects to his father. Bao-.yu seemed thunderstruck by the ominous summons; he went to see Grand-mother Jia, hurried back to **Green** Delights, ate a scanty meal, quickly rinsed his mouth and set off again for his father's apartment.

Jia Zheng was waiting for him in the inner study. Baoyu entered, made his bow and stood attentively to one side.

'As you know,' Jia Zheng began, 'I have been rather preoccupied recently and have not had an opportunity to question you on the progress of your studies. Let me see, I recall that the Preceptor had set you a month for revision, after which time he was to give you your Maiden Theme. That must have been at least two months ago. You should have made a start by now, I think.'

'I have, sir,' replied Bao-yu. 'I have written three compositions. I have been waiting for my work to improve before venturing to trouble you with any specimens of it. Those were the Preceptor's instructions, sir.'

'What were your first three Themes?'

'The first was from Analects, sir, Book Two,' replied Bao-yu. *"'Annos Quindecim natus:* The Sage Bent upon Learning in his Fifteenth Year." The second was also from Analects, Book One: *"Obscuritatem Ae quo Animo Toleratam:* Lack of Acclaim Borne with Equanimity." And the third was from Mencius, Book Three, Part Two: *"Tunc Accedunt Micium:* They Succumb to the Mician Heresy."'

'And have you kept your draft versions?' asked Jia Zheng.

'I have fair copies of all three, sir, with the Preceptor's emendations.'

'Are they at home, or in the schoolroom?'

'In the schoolroom, sir.'

'Then have someone go and fetch them at once. I should like to see them.'

Bao-yu sent an 'express' message through to Tealeaf:

'Go to the schoolroom; in the drawer of my desk is a thin bamboo-paper copybook with *Tasks* written on the cover. Bring it here, quickly!'

In a short while Tealeaf returned with the book, which he handed to Bao-yu who presented it to his father. Jia Zheng opened it at the first page and began reading the first of the eight 'legs' of Bao-yu's Maiden Task.

AMPLICATIO PRIMA

THEMA: ANNOS QUINDECIM NATUS CRUS PRIMUM: APERTURA

Sapiens perfectusque Vir
a puero quidem
se ad Philosophiam applicavit.

Jia Zheng glanced at the emendation and asked Bao-yu to construe his Apertura orally. Bao-yu began:

'The Sage, while still a boy... forsooth... was wholly Bent upon Learning.'

Jia Zheng looked up.

‘Your use of *puer* betrays an inadequate comprehension of the Theme. I see the Preceptor has substituted the *annos quindecim natus* of the original. Good. *Pueritia,* ou see, covers the whole span of boyhood up to and including the age of sixteen, whereas here the Sage is alluding to specific milestones in his own life. We must echo the numbers he uses, if we are to preserve the correct sequence of his moral and intellectual development.’

Jia Zheng continued with the second ‘leg’.

CRUS SECUNDUM: CONTINUATIO

Tantam autem Applicationem
Rarissimam esse confiteor.

‘And what,’ he asked with a shake of the head, ‘do you mean by this?’

‘That the Sage’s application,’ replied Bao-yu, ‘is a thing ordinary mortals scarcely ever achieve.’

‘Childish nonsense, my boy! It only shows what a creature of indolence you are. I am glad to see that the Preceptor has rewritten the entire *Continuatio* for you. Kindly construe, from *"omnibus enim".’*

Bao-yu obliged:

‘For many are those who aspire to Learning. But how few alas possess the application necessary for the fulfilment of this Aspiration. Does not the Sage’s achievement testify to the strength of his Moral Convictions in his Fifteenth Year?’

‘I thank you. I trust you understand the emendation?’

‘Yes sir.

Jia Zheng passed on to the second Theme (It may be helpful at this point to provide some idea of the pedagogic principles that guided Dai-ru in his selection of Themes for his young pupil. His plan was roughly speaking as follows:First Theme - reiterate need for Youthful Zeal. Second Theme - clarify point raised during second day’s oral exegesis, viz. Worldly Success versus Moral Achievement. Third Theme - Orthodoxy versus Heresy.): ‘Lack of Acclaim Borne with Equanimity.’ Jia Zheng read the Preceptor’s emended version, translating to himself as he went along:

‘If a man is able to view Worldly Acclaim with Equanimity, nothing can affect his Pleasure and Delight’.

He screwed up his eyes to decipher Bao-yu’s original:

‘What’s all this? "Equanimity is the Essence of Scholarship." You have completely failed to treat the first element in your Theme, *Obscuritas,* and have embarked prematurely on a discussion of *Nobilitas* which should be kept for a later section. Your Preceptor’s emendation shows a correct *Dispositio.* I hope you notice the way in which he uses *Amoenitatem Dclectationemque Animi* to allude to the passage in Analects immediately preceding the rubric? Do you recall? *Nonne quidem amoenum? Nonne quidem delectabile?* You must study this sort of thing carefully.’

‘Yes sir.

Jia Zheng went on to read Bao-yu’s *Continuatio.* There was another reference here to the Essence of Scholarship, which had once again been emended by the Preceptor to Pleasure and Delight.

‘The same fault as in your *Apertura,’* commented Jia Zheng. ‘The emendation is tolerable. Not particularly stylish, but clear.’

He moved on to the third and last Theme: ‘The Mician Heresy’. As he recollected the provenance of the quotation, he looked up in surprise and after a moment’s thought asked Bao-yu:

‘Have you reached this far in Mencius?’

‘Yes sir,’ Bao-yu hastened to assure him. ‘The Preceptor decided to go through Mencius with me first, as it is the easiest of the Four Books. We finished the whole of Mencius three days ago, and now we are doing Analects Part One.’

Jia Zheng continued reading. By the time Bao-yu had come to write this third composition, he had more or less mastered the 'ignoble art of the Octopartite', and had learned to handle the necessary rhetorical constructions with a certain glib dexterity. Jia Zheng studied the first two 'legs', and observed that in this case the Preceptor had paid the young essayist the compliment of a total suspension of the corrective brush. The *Apertura* lamented the fact that those who rejected the Hedonist Doctrine of Yanxius *(Yanxianam il/am Voluptatis Doctrinam)* were still unable to find the True Path of Confucian Orthodoxy *(Orthodoxiae Confucianae Veram Viam)*, but were instead blindly drawn into the fold of that prevalent (and deplorable) Mician Heresy of Universal Love *(Micianam illam Caritatis Universae Heterodoxiam)*.

'Nicely put,' Jia Zheng commented, and continued reading. A little further on he paused. 'Tell me,' he asked, evidently impressed by what he read, 'did you write this unaided?'

'Yes sir.

He nodded pensively.

'Nothing brilliant about it of course, but for a first attempt not at all bad, I must say. Ah, Mencius! I recall how during my tour of duty as an examiner I had occasion to set as one of my Themes *"So/i Nobilitatis Sapientiaeque Alumni suntpotis"*. All the first-degree candidates, I regret to say, had their heads crammed full of the standard compositions on the Theme, and not a single one of them could come up with anything original. All plagiarisms. Are you familiar with the quotation?'

'Yes sir. Mencius, Book One, Part Two: "Only Good Breeding and a Heritage of Culture have the power to sustain a man in the face of Adversity"

'Good,' replied Jia Zheng. 'I should like you to show me what you can do. Something of your own, please, not another feat of memorization. An *Apertura* will do.'

Bao-yu lowered his head in concentration and began racking his brains for a pithy opening phrase, while Jia Zheng stood thoughtfully in the doorway, hands clasped behind his back. Just at that moment, a diminutive pageboy went flashing past. As he caught sight of the Master in the doorway, he froze, his body slightly inclined, his arms hanging limp at his side.

'What is your errand, boy?' asked Jia Zheng brusquely.

'Please, sir, Mrs Xue has just arrived at Her Old Ladyship's and Mrs Lian has sent me with special instructions to the kitchen, sir,' jabbered the unfortunate boy. Jia Zheng made no reply, and he fled.

Now Bao-yu assumed that if Aunt Xue had come over for a visit, then Bao-chai (whom he had greatly missed since her departure from the Garden) was sure to have come with her. His excitement at the thought of seeing her again spurred him on.

'Sir,' he ventured, 'I have a draft *Apertura* for your approval.'

'Go ahead.'

Bao-yu intoned his opening sentence:

'Non omnes Sapientiae Alumni sunt, neque possunt carere Stabili Patrimonjo.'

Jia Zheng nodded.

'Thank you. That will do for today. In future, please bear in mind these two Golden Rules for Composition. Before raising your brush, always be certain of the sequence of your *Dispositio* and the clarity of your *Inventio*. Tell me, was your grandmother aware that I sent for you?'

'Yes sir.'

'Off you go then. You had better go over and see her now.

'Sir!'

Bao-yu manoeuvred his way backwards out of the study and set off along the covered way, imitating to perfection the scholar's leisurely gait. As soon as he reached the moon-gate, however, and had placed its large protective screen between himself and the study, he broke into a run and raced ahead towards Grandmother Jia's

apartment.

'Careful you don't trip!' Tealeaf shouted after him. 'The Master's coming.'

Bao-yu was much too excited to pay any attention. As he neared the entrance to Grandmother Jia's apartment, he could hear the sounds of conversation and laughter coming from within. He could make out, among others, the voices of Lady Wang, Xi-feng and Tan-chun.

When the maids saw him coming, they quickly drew aside the portiere and whispered in his ear as he passed through:

'Mrs Xue is here, you know.'

Bao-yu hurried in to greet his aunt, and then paid his respects to Grandmother Jia. He gave her a full account of his interview with Jia Zheng, and her face radiated pride and delight.

'Where's Cousin Chai?' he asked, turning to the assembled company.

'She couldn't come with me today,' said Aunt Xue, with a rather unconvincing smile. 'She and Caltrop have a lot of sewing to catch up on at home.'

Bao-yu was very disappointed, and only a sense of duty kept him from leaving at once. Dinner was served and Grandmother Jia and Aunt Xue sat up at the table of honour, while Tan-chun and the others took their places down below.

'Where will Bao-yu be sitting?' asked Aunt Xue.

'Up here with me,' said Grandmother Jia with a smile.

'Li Gui told me to have my dinner before seeing Father,' Bao-yu hastily informed her. 'So I asked for a quick meal when I got in from school. I had a dish of something and a bowl of rice steeped in tea. You all go ahead, please.'

'In that case,' said Grandmother Jia, 'Feng can come and sit with us. Your mother says it 5 one of her vegetarian days today, so she can eat alone.'

'That's right,' said Lady Wang to Xi-feng. 'You eat with them. Don't wait for me. I shall be having my vegetables at home.'

Xi-feng politely took her seat and the maids put out the wine cups and chopsticks. Then Xi-feng went round with the wine kettle, and, when everyone's cup was filled, returned to her seat.

After they had all had a drink of wine, Grandmother Jia asked Aunt Xue:

'Didn't I hear you say Caltrop just then? That's funny. One of my maids was talking only the other day about someone called Lily, and I couldn't for the life of me think who she meant. When I asked her, she told me it was Caltrop's new name. Do tell me what she wants to go and change her name for?'

The colour rose in Aunt Xue's cheeks and she sighed:

'Please don't ever mention it again. Since the day Pan married that wretched wife we haven't had a moment's peace. The bickering, the nastiness, it's been too awful. I've tried talking to her several times, but she is quite impervious to reason. And I can't bear quarrelling with them all the time, so I just end up trying to turn a blind eye. Yes, she decided to change Caltrop's name because she said she didn't like it.~'

'Oh well,' said Grandmother Jia, 'what's in a name when all's said and done?"

'I shall die for shame!' cried Aunt Xue. 'I'm sure all of you know the *real* reason. It wasn't the name. It was the fact that Ba6-chai had thought of it in the first place. *That's* what she *really* objected to.'

'What *do* you mean?' asked Grandmother Jia.

Aunt Xue had been dabbing at her eyes all the while with her handkerchief. She heaved another deep sigh before she was able to continue.

'Surely you must know? Every single thing my daughter-in-law does is aimed at provoking Bao-chai. She won't leave her alone. The other day, when you sent someone round to see me, we were in the middle of one of our scenes!'

'That must have been the day I heard you had a little bit of a liver upset,' said Grandmother Jia tactfully. 'I was

going to send someone over to see how you were, but then I heard that you were feeling better so I thought no more about it. You should take my advice, dear, and stop worrying. They're a newly married couple and you must give them time to settle down. And you're so lucky to have Chai. She is such a gentle, unflappable girl. She may be young, but my word, she has the aplomb of someone twice her age! When my maid came back and told us what had happened that day; and the way she coped with it, we were all singing her praises. Such a wonderful disposition! She's a girl in a million. When *she* gets married, if you don't mind my saying so, her mother-in-law will take her to her bosom and the whole household will be devoted to her, I am certain of it.)

Earlier, Bao-yu had found the general tenor of the conversation rather distasteful, and was just saying something about having to leave when his grandmother embarked upon this eulogy of Bao-chai, and he found himself listening with rapt attention.

'What's the use?' said Aunt Xue. 'Whatever her qualities, she is still only a daughter. With a son as hopeless -as Pan, I can have no peace; I never stop worrying in case he has gone off to one of his haunts, had too much to drink again and landed himself in another brawl. In fact the only time I ever feel at all reassured is when he's over here with his cousins Zhen and Lian.'

At this, Bao-yu chirped up:

'There's really nothing to fear, Auntie. I can vouch for Cousin Pan's friends. They are all serious businessmen and far too respectable to get into trouble.'

'In that case,' said Aunt Xue with a smile, 'perhaps I shouldn't worry.'

Supper was over by now, and Bao-yu excused himself, saying he still had some preparation to do that evening. The maids were serving tea, when Amber came into the room and whispered something in Grandmother Jia's ear. She turned to Xi-feng:

'You'd better go quickly, my dear. It's Qiao-jie.'

Xi-feng had no idea what the matter could be and the others were as puzzled as she was.

'Patience sent one of the younger maids round with a message for you, Mrs Lian,' explained Amber, crossing over to where Xi-feng sat. 'Miss Qiao-jie does not seem at all well and would you please go over as soon as possible.'

'You'd better go straight away,' said Grandmother Jia. 'You don't have to stand on ceremony for your Aunt Xue.'

'Yes Grannie,' said Xi-feng, and she took her leave of Aunt Xue. As she was on her way out she heard Lady Wang say:

'You go ahead. I'll be along shortly. Tell the maids to be quiet and not to make a lot of fuss. Little ones get so easily unsettled. And make sure that kitten and puppy are kept well out of the way. Poor child! I suppose little upsets are to be expected in a family as greatly blessed as ours.

Xi-feng promised Lady Wang to carry out her instructions and left with her maid. After her departure, Aunt Xue went on to inquire after Dai-yu's health.

'Miss Lin is all right,' replied Grandmother Jia. 'She just takes everything too seriously. That's what is undermining her health, if you ask me. She may i)e as clever as Bao-chai, but she lacks your daughter's easy way with people. Chai is so responsible and considerate.'

The conversation continued a little longer, and then Aunt Xue said she must be going.

'I'll leave you in peace now. I'd better see how Chai and Caltrop are getting on at home. I'll go along with Aunt Wang and have a look at Qiao-jie on my way.

'What a good idea,' said Grandmother Jia. 'With your experience you will be able to give them some helpful advice, I'm sure.

Aunt Xue took her leave and went with Aunt Wang to Xi-feng's apartment.

To return to Jia Zheng: he had been pleasantly surprised by Bao-yu's performance that evening, and mentioned it later in the course of conversation with his literary friends in the outer study. A newcomer among them, an

excellent Go-player by the name of Wang Er-tiao (also called Go-between Wang), remarked:
'I think we have all noticed a marked progress in Master Bao, sir. He is becoming quite a cultured young fellow.'
'I hardly think so,' replied Jia Zheng. 'His powers of comprehension have improved, I grant you. But culture? No, he has a long way to go yet.'

'Come come, Sir Zheng!' said Zhan Guang. 'You are being too modest. Friend Wang's opinion is one we all share. Master Bao will surely go far.'

'I'm afraid you are allowing your partiality for the boy to sway your judgement,' was their patron's reply, but he was visibly pleased.

'With your leave, sir,' continued Wang, 'there is another matter in this connection that I should like to broach if I may.'

'By all means.'

Wang gave a smarmy smile.

'An acquaintance of mine, Excellency Zhang, who used to be Taotai of the Nanshao Circuit, has a daughter, sir, a most attractive, industrious and generally commendable child, so I am told, and as yet unbetrothed.. Excellency Zhang has no sons of his own and is, I should add, a man of enormous wealth. He is most particular in this matter, and stipulates that his son-in-law must come from an eminent and prosperous family, and must be a young man of distinguished character himself. In the two months I have been here, sir, I have become aware of the moral and intellectual calibre of young Master Bao, the promise of great things to come**.** If the proposal were known to come from a family as illustrious as your own, sir, it would I am sure need but a single visit from me for the betrothal to be as good as settled.'

'It is true that Bao-yu has reached a marriageable age,' replied Jia Zheng. 'Lady Jia has reminded me of it more than once. But who is this Excellency Zhang? I'm afraid I don't know him.'

'Allow me to clarify, if I may,' ventured Zhan. 'I am acquainted with the Zhang family friend Wang refers to. They are related to Sir She's family, in point of fact, and it should be easy enough to elicit more information trom them.'

'Really?' said Jia Zheng thoughtfully.. 'I can't say I have ever heard the name of any such relation mentioned at my brother's.'

'Well, strictly speaking, sir,' explained Zhan, 'they are related by marriage to Lady Xing's elder brother.'

'So, that's where the relationship lies,' thought Jia Zheng.

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A little later he went in, with the intention of talking this new proposal over with Lady Wang and asking her to sound out Lady Xing about the Zhang family. He found, however, that his wife was out, visiting Qiao-jie with Aunt Xue. At lighting-up time, when Aunt Xue went home and Lady Wang returned, Jia Zheng discussed the proposal with her. He also asked after Qiao-jie.
'We~ think it's convulsions,' she said.
'Nothing serious, I hope?'
'It's too early to tell. The fits have still not passed.'
Jia Zheng sighed but said no more, and they retired for the night.

Next day, when Lady Xing came to pay her morning respects to Grandmother Jia, Lady Wang mentioned the marriage proposal and took the opportunity of asking Lady Xing about the Zhang family.
'Yes, they are relations of ours,' divulged Lady Xing. 'But we've had no contact with them for years now, so I've no notion what this Miss Zhang is like. Now that you mention it, Ying's mother-in-law, Mrs Sun, sent one of her

women to call on me a day or two ago, and she men-tioned the Zhangs. She told me they had a da'ighter and had asked the Suns to look out for a suitable husband for her. Apparently she is an only child and rather delicate. She has had a little education and sounds a quiet, shy sort of girl, used to staying at home. As she is an only child, her father won't contemplate her leaving home. He is afraid the severity of a mother-in-law might be too much of a strain for her and insists on her husband coming to live with them and taking on his share of their family respon-sibilities.'

'Out of the question!' exclaimed Grandmother Jia. 'Bao-yu is difficult enough for us to look after as it is. Can you imagine sending him out to be the head of some strange family?'

'You are absolutely right of course,' said Lady Xing.

Grandmother Jia turned to Lady Wang.

'Be sure to tell Zheng when you go home that I say this match is definitely off.'

'Yes Mother.'

'Tell me,' the old lady continued, 'how was Qiao-jie when you went to see her yesterday? Patience gave me the impression earlier on that it was something serious. I should like to go and see her myself.'

The two ladies thanked Grandmother Jia for the kind thought, but begged her not to trouble herself for Qiao-jie's sake**.**

'It's not only for her sake. It's the exercise. I'd like to stretch my legs a bit,' said the old lady. 'You two have your lunch and then we can all go over together.'

Lady Wang and Lady Xing went home for lunch. Afterwards they collected Grandmother Jia and escorted her to Xi-feng's apartment. Xi-feng greeted them at the door and conducted them inside.

'How is she?' asked Grandmother Jia.

'It seems to be an attack of convulsions,' Xi-feng informed her.

'Hadn't you better call the doctor straight away?'

'We already have, Grannie dear.'

Grandmother Jia went in with Lady Wang and Lady Xing and found Qiao-jie in the arms of her nurse, wrapped in a little padded quilt of **pink** damask-silk, her face deathly white, her eyebrows and nostrils quivering slightly.After a brief inspection, they withdrew to the outer room, and sat down to talk. Presently a junior maid from Lady Wang's apartment came in with a message for Xi-feng:

'The Master has sent to inquire how Qiao-jie is, Mrs Lian.'

'Tell him we have sent for the doctor,' replied Xi-feng, 'and that I will report as soon as he has made out his prescription.'

The maid's arrival reminded Grandmother Jia of the recently aired marriage proposal. She turned to Lady Wang:

'You ought to go and tell Zheng straight away about that business, dear. If we put a stop to it now, before someone talks to the Zhang family, we will save ourselves the trouble of having to say no to them later.'

She turned to Lady Xing.

'Why is it you haven't seen much of the Zhangs lately, anyway?'

'As a matter of fact,' replied Lady Xing, 'they're very mean and not the right sort of family for us at all. It would have been a needless humiliation for Bao-yu.'

'That must be Bao-yu's betrothal you are talking about, Mother?' said Xi-feng, who had already formed a shrewd idea of what was going on.

'Why yes, we are actually,' said Lady Xing.

Grandmother Jia told Xi-feng about the Zhang proposal. Xi-feng laughed:

'I hope you'll excuse me, Grannie, Mother, Auntie Wang, for speaking out of turn, but what need is there to go looking for a wife for Bao-yu, when we have a "predestined affinity" here before our very eyes?'

'What *do* you 'mean?' asked Grandmother Jia, intrigued.

'Surely, Grannie, you can't have forgotten Bao's Magic Jade and Chai's Golden Locket?'

Grandmother Jia laughed.
'Of course! But why on earth didn't you mention it while Aunt Xue was here yesterday?'
'It would hardly have been right for me to speak up in the presence of my elders and betters,' replied Xi-feng. 'Besides, Aunt Xue had come on a social call and it would have been out of place. If we are to do the thing properly, Mother and Aunt Wang must go over and ask Aunt Xue formally for Bao-chai's hand.'
They all laughed at her.
'Bless you, Fengie,' said Grandmother Jia. 'I really *must* be going gaga.'

Meanwhile the doctor was announced and Grandmother Jia took a seat in the outer room, while the two ladies discreetly withdrew. The doctor entered with Jia Lian and paid his respects to Grandmother Jia before proceeding into Qiao-jie's room. When he returned, he bowed to Grandmother Jia and pronounced his diagnosis.
'The little girl is suffering from a convulsive attack complicated by an internal fever. She must first take a single dose of a combined anti-spasmodic and expectorant, and then I want you to give her a course of Four Prodigies Powders. It is quite a serious attack.
'You will notice Cow's Bezoar-stone in my prescription. I should mention that a lot of the Bezoars sold by the apothecaries nowadays are not genuine. It is important that you procure the real thing.'

Grandmother Jia thanked him for coming, and the doctor went out with Jia Lian, wrote out his prescription and left.
'There's always Ginseng in the house,' said Xi-feng, 'but I don't think we've any Bezoar. We'll have to buy some and make sure it 5 genuine.'

'Wait until I've sent someone round to my sister's,' said Lady Wang. 'I know Pan has often done business with merchants from overseas. They might easily have some real Bezoar.
As she was speaking, several of the girls arrived to see Qiao-jie. They stayed for a short while, and then left with Grandmother Jia and the others.
Qiao-jie's expectorant was now prepared and poured down her throat. There was a retching sound and up it came, medicine, phlegm and all, much to Xi-feng's relief. One of Lady Wang's junior maids arrived with a little **red** paper packet.
'We found some Bezoar, ma'am. Her Ladyship says you're to weigh **Out** the correct amount and take as much as you need.'
Xi-feng asked the maid to convey her thanks to Lady
Wang, took the package and told Patience to mix Pulverized Pearl, Baros Camphor and Cinnabar in the prescribed proportions and bring them to the boil. She herself weighed out the correct amount of powdered Bezoar on the scales and added it to the mixture. She waited for Qiao-jie to wake again before administering the potion.
Who should lift the door-blind and walk in at this very moment but Jia Huan.
'How's Qiao-jie, Cousin Feng? Mother sent me to inquire.'
The sight of either Aunt Zhao or her son invariably made.Xi-feng's hackles rise.
'She's a little better,' she replied in rather a caustic tone. 'When you go back, please tell your mother I'm sorry to have caused her so much trouble.'
Jia Huan mumbled something about going, but started nosing round the room.
'I say,' he said after a while. 'I heard you had some of that Bezoar stuff in here. I've never seen any before. Let's have a look.'
'Qiao-jie is only just on the mend,' said Xi-feng, 'so do you mind not crashing around in here? The Bezoar has all been used for her potion anyway.
Hearing this, Jia Huan reached out clumsily for the chafing-skillet to have a look. He lost his grip, and there was a great hiss as the skillet tipped over and the precious medicine spilled into the brazier, half extinguishing the fire.

Jia Huan could see he was in for trouble and beat a hasty retreat. Xi-feng was so furious she seemed to emit sparks of rage.

'You vile harpy's brat!' she screamed after him. 'Bane of my life! What can I have done in a past life to deserve such spite? Your mother tried to do *me* in, now it's Qiao-jie's turn! How many generations must this feud go on for?'

Patience had her share of the blame too, for not being more careful. While Xi-feng was in full spate, a maid came in to fetch Jia Huan home.

‘Go and tell Mrs Zhao,’ ordered Xi-feng, ‘that she is putting herself to too much trouble. Qiao-jie is as good as
dead already, so she needn’t go to such lengths!’

The maid, nonplussed by Xi-feng’s remarks, went over to Patience, who was busy mixing up another dose of medicine, and asked her in a whisper:

‘What’s made Mrs Lian so angry?’

Patience told her about Jia Huan’s disastrous episode.

‘No wonder he ran away and didn’t dare come home!’ exclaimed the maid. ‘Goodness knows how that Huan will turn out! Can I help you tidy up, Patience?’

‘Don’t worry. Luckily we had a little Bezoar left and it’s all mixed now, so you might as well go.

‘I’ll certainly tell Mrs Zhao the minute I get back. Perhaps that will stop her bragging about him all the time.

The maid returned and, true to her word, gave Aunt Zhao a detailed account of Jia Huan’s debacle.

‘Bring him to me!’ cried Aunt Zhao in an agitated tone.

After a brief search, the maid discovered him skulking in the adjoining room, and Aunt Zhao immediately began discharging a volley of abuse in his direction:

‘You miserable little runt! What did you have to go and get yourself into trouble for, spilling their medicine all over the place? I said go and ask how she was, not go barging in! But you had to, didn’t you? And when you were in, you had to stay and goad the dragon on. You must have known you were playing with fire! You wait till I tell your father about this! He’ll give you the thrashing you deserve!’

Even stronger words had already been let loose in reply from the other room. But to hear for yourself, please turn to the next chapter.

CHAPTER 85

It is announced that Jia Zheng has been promoted
to the rank of Permanent Secretary
And it is discovered that Xue Pan has once more
brought upon himself the threat of exile

‘All I did was knock a skillet over and spill a bit of medicine!’ yelled Jia Huan before his mother could finish. ‘That measly little brat of hers is still alive, isn’t she? Anyone would think I’d done her in, the way you two are going on at me about it, slandering me and dragging my name in the mud! One day I really will finish her off! That would teach you all a lesson! You’d better tell them to look out!’

Aunt Zhao came hurtling in and clapped a hand over his mouth.

‘You’re asking for it, saying such dreadful things! They’ll have your neck first, my boy, see if they don’t!’

They kept it up like this for some time. Jia Huan slipped in Xi-feng’s barbed little message, which made his mother more implacable than ever. There was now no question of her sending anyone over to Xi-feng’s with an apology, and although Qiao-jie made a complete recovery a few days later, the episode had deepened the feud between the two sections of the family.

One day Steward Lin came in to report to Jia Zheng that it was the Prince of Bei-jing’s birthday.

‘Are there any special instructions, sir?’

‘Send whatever we usually send,’ replied Jia Zheng. ‘Report to Sir She first, before delivering the presents.’

‘Very good sir,’ said Lin, and went to make the necessary arrangements. A little later, Jia She arrived himself,

to discuss with his brother the details of the visit. They decided to take Cousin Zhen, Jia Lian and Bao-yu along with them. If for the four older men it was merely another social engagement, for Ba6-yu it was an opportunity long awaited. He had been a fervent admirer of the Prince 5 handsome. looks and graceful bearing ever since their memorable first encounter at the roadside halt. He changed eagerly into his smartest clothes and went to join the others.

On arrival at the Palace, Jia She and Jia Zheng presented their cards and before long a Eunuch Chamberlain of the Household emerged, fingering his beads, and greeted them with a little peal of falsetto laughter:

'I hope you are both keeping well?'

They reciprocated the inquiry and the three younger Jias came forward to make their greeting.

'His Imperial Highness will be pleased to receive you now.' The eunuch led the five of them in, through two further gateways and past a large state-room, to the Inner Gate of the Prince's personal residence; Here they halted once more, while the eunuch went in to announce their arrival, leaving them to be entertained by the various junior eunuchs in attendance at the gate.

After a brief interval their original escort returned.

'This way, please.'

They all stepped solemnly forward again. The Prince, dressed in full robe of state, had paid them the compliment of coming out to receive them in one of the covered walks by the entrance to the main hall. The two brothers advanced first and did homage, followed in order of seniority by Cousin Zhen, Jia Lian and Bao-yu. The Prince took Bao-yu by the hand.

'It has been a long while since we last met. You have been much in my thoughts.'

He smiled:

'Tell me, how fares it with that stone of yours?'

Bao-yu dropped to a half-kneeling position and with head bowed replied:

'Your Highness's beneficent aura has preserved us from misfortune.'

'There is nothing very special to eat today,' continued the Prince pleasantly. 'But at least we shall be able to spend a little time talking together.'

Eunuchs lifted the portiere, and the Prince made a charming gesture of yielding the *pas* to his guests before leading the way in. The Jias followed, walking with a deferential stoop, and once inside Jia She was the first to offer his birthday felicitations. These the Prince accepted modestly, while Jia She sank to his knees. The others followed suit.

Once these formalities (a detailed description of which our narrative omits) were over, the Jias began discreetly to take their leave. The Prince turned to his eunuchs and gave instructions that they were to be escorted to the reception which was being given for his own family and a few other distinguished guests and that they were to be attended to with the utmost care. He asked Bao-yu to stay behind for a chat.

'Do sit down,' he began, when the others had left. Baoyu made his kotow of thanks for this honour, and perching delicately on a covered porcelain tabouret near the door, talked for a while of his studies and compositions and other things. The Prince seemed fonder than ever of his young protégé', and offered him some tea - a still greater honour. He went on to say:

'Excellency Governor Wu was in town yesterday for an audience with His Majesty. He told me that your father, in his last posting as Commissioner of Education, showed the most scrupulous impartiality and gained the respect of all the candidates he examined. At the audience, when H.M. inquired, Wu gave your father the highest recommendation. Clearly a favourable omen...'

'You have shown us a great favour, Your Highness, and Governor Wu has done us a great kindess.'

'You have shown us a great favour, Your Highness, and Governor Wu has done us a great kindness.'

As he was speaking, a junior eunuch returned from the reception in the front state-room to convey a message of thanks from the various Lords and Gentlemen for their banquet, and to present their cards of appreciation and midday greeting to the Prince, who glanced through them and handed them back with a gracious smile and a brief word of acknowledgement.

'And, if it please Your Highness,' the eunuch continued, 'the repast you ordered specially for Master Jia Bao-yu is now ready.'

The Prince gave him a few further words of instruction, and the eunuch led Bao-yu out to an exquisitely appointed suite of rooms facing a small courtyard, where he ordered another attendant to wait upon him during the meal. Afterwards, Bao-yu returned to give thanks and the Prince continued chatting in the same complimentary vein. Suddenly he laughed:

'When I first saw that ~tone of yours, I was so taken with it, you know, that on my return I gave my jade-workers a description of it and asked them to make me one like it. I am so glad you have come today.

I can give it to you to take home. It might amuse you to keep it.'
One of the junior eunuchs was ordered to bring the jade in, and the Prince. himself handed it to Bao-yu, who received it humbly in both hands, gave thanks and then took his leave. The Prince told two more junior eunuchs to accompany him out, he rejoined the other members of the family, and they all returned home.
On arrival, Jia She paid his respects to Grandmother Jia and left for his own apartment. J ia Zheng and the others also paid their respects and gave her a full account of the reception. Bao-yu communicated to his father the news he had received about Governor Wu's sponsorial activities.
'Governor Wu,' commented Jia Zheng drily; 'is an old friend, and a man after my own heart. He is also, I might add, a statesman of the highest integrity.'
After a little more chat, Grandmother Jia gave permission for them all to disperse. J ia Zheng took his leave, an~ was followed by Cousin Zhen, Jia Lian and Bao-yu as far as the door.
With a parting injunction to the three of them to stay and keep Grandmother Jia company a little longer, Jia Zheng returned to his apartment. He had not been there long when a maid came in to announce that Steward Lin was waiting outside with something to report. She also handed him a **red** visiting card with Governor Wu's name on it. Jia Zheng told her to admit Lin, and went out to speak to him on the verandah.
'Excellency Governor Wu called to see you today, sir,' reported Lin. 'I informed him that you were out. And another thing, sir; I have heard that a Permanent Secretary's position has become vacant in the Ministry of Works. According to various people, including officials in the Ministry, you are to be given the post as confirmation of your preseht rank.'
'H'm. . .' said Jia Zheng. 'We shall see.'
Lin conferred with his master on one or two other matters and then left.

After Jia Zheng's departure, Cousin Zhen and Jia Lian returned to their separate apartments, while Bao-yu went back to Grandmother Jia's. He was now able to tell her all about *4' is* day at the Palace. He described how kindly the Prince had treated him, and took out the jade he had been given, which was passed round and commented on with some amusement. Grandmother Jia told a maid to put it safely away.
'And don't whatever you do take your *own* off,' she said to Bao-yu. 'You don't want to go getting them. mixed up.
Bao-yu promptly untied his original from around his neck.
'But look,' he said, 'they're so different, how could I ever get them mixed up? That reminds me, Grannie, of something that happened the other night, as I was going to bed. I had just taken my jade off and hung it inside the bed-curtains, when I noticed a halo around it, and the whole inside of my bed was lit up with a rosy glow.'
'You silly boy!' exclaimed Grandmother Jia. 'There's **red** thread in your pelmet. That must have been the lamp-light showing through.'
'But it couldn't have been. The lamps were all out and it was pitch-black in my room, and I *still* saw it glowing.'
Lady Xing and Lady Wang exchanged a meaningful smile. A certain rosy' event had been much in the forefront of their minds recently. Xi-feng too could not restrain herself from remarking cryptically:
'No doubt this heralds the Big Event...
'What big event?' asked Bao-yu.
'Nothing you would understand,' put in Grandmother Jia promptly. 'Now come along. It's been a hectic day for you, and you ought to go and rest, and not waste any more time here telling tall stories.
Bao-yu stayed a minute or two longer and then returned to the Garden. When he was out of the room, Grandmother Jia turned to Lady Wang:
'Well, have you been to see Mrs Xue, and put it to her yet?'
'Yes Mother, we have,' replied Lady Wang. 'Feng has been so busy with little Qiao-jie the last few days, and we just haven't had a chance to go until today. Anyway, my sister seems very happy with the idea, but she says she 'will have to wait until Pan comes home before saying anything final. She must consult him first, as the eldest man in the family.'
'Quite right,' said Grandmother Jia. 'We shall have to bide our time until they have had a chance to talk it over. In the meantime, not a word of this to anyone.
We must leave these matrimonial confabulations and accompany the unwitting subject of them, who' on his arrival at **Green** Delights confided to Aroma:
'Grannie and Feng were being most mysterious about something just now. I don't know what's going on.'

Aroma looked thoughtful for a moment.
'I've no idea either,' she finally returned, with a peculiar smile, adding (as if it were an afterthought): 'I wonder, was Miss Lin there when they were talking?'
'Of course not! You know she's been ill and has to stay
in.
Their conversation was interrupted by the sound of Musk and Ripple having a tiff in the next room.
'What *is* the matter with you two?' Aroma called out.
'It's all Ripple's fault!' replied Musk. 'She's been cheating at cards! She took my money fast enough when *she* won, but now that I've won she won't let go of a penny. And now I'm cleaned right out!'
'Oh come on!' Bao-yu chided them with a laugh. 'Stop being so stupid! Who, wants to quarrel over a few coins?' They both pouted and went off in high dudgeon, leaving Aroma. to settle Bao-yu down for the night.
Now Aroma was sure that the mysterious conversation Bao-yu had referred to in some way concerned his betrothal. She had only feigned ignorance for fear that in his present mood, mention of such a touchy subject might provoke another of his fits. She herself was most anxious to know the latest news, and while she lay, awake that night she decided to go and see Nightingale first thing in the morning. Nightingale would be sure to know, and would be able to tell her what was going on.
And so the next day she rose early, and after seeing Bao-yu off to school, completed her own toilet and strolled through the Garden to the Naiad's House. Nightingale was out in the front courtyard picking flowers, and greeted her with a smile:
'Hello, Aroma. Do come in and sit down.'
'Thank you. Busy with your flowers, I see... How is Miss Lin?'
'She has lust finished her toilet. She's waiting for her medicine to be warmed up.'
Nightingale took Aroma inside. Dai-yu was reading a book, which provided Aroma with a ready-made topic of conversation. She gave an ingratiating smile:
'It'd be a wonder if you *didn't* feel tired sometimes, Miss, reading at such an early hour. If Master Bao would only follow your good example!'
Dai-yu smiled wanly and put her book down. Meanwhile Snowgoose had come in with a small tray .containing two cups, one of medicine and one of water. She was followed by a junior maid bearing spittoon and bowl.
Aroma's intention in coming had been to sound them out; but somehow amid all these medical ministrations an easy opening failed to present itself, and she reckoned that it was not worth running the risk of offending the prickly Miss Lin on the offchance of obtaining the information she wanted. So, after sitting there a little longer and making a little desultory chat, she said goodbye and set off back home.
She was approaching **Green** Delights, when she saw to her considerable surprise two male figures standing a little way off, and thought it more discreet not to proceed any further. 'One of them had already spotted her, however, and came running up. It turned out to be Ploughboy, one of Bao-yu's pages.
'What do you think you're doing here?' she asked him.
'Master Yun's lust come with a letter for Master Bao, and he's waiting for a reply.'
'But you know perfectly well that Master Bao goes to school every day, so what's the point of waiting?'
'That's what I told' him,' said Ploughboy, grinning sheepishly. 'But he just said that I was to tell *you* and he'd wait for your reply instead.'
A suitable retort was already on Aroma's lips when she noticed that the other man had started slinking towards them. A closer inspection confirmed that the stealthy intruder was indeed Jia Yun. She turned to Ploughboy and said briskly:
'Tell him his letter will be delivered to Master Bao in due course.
Jia Yun's slow and sinuous progress had been designed to camouflage his true aim, which was to achieve a tête-a'tête with the delectable Miss Aroma. His dismissal (which he heard only too clearly), when almost within reach of his goal, obliged him to abandon these plans and come to a premature standstill. Aroma turned smartly on her heel and walked on into **Green** Delights, leaving Ploughboy to escort the crestfallen Jia Yun from the Garden.
Aroma related the incident that evening to Bao-yu, on his return from school:
'That Master Yun from West Lane was here today,' she said briefly.
'What did he want?'
'He left a note for you.
'Where is it? I'd better see what it says.'
Musk went to fetch Yun's note from the bookshelf in the inner ro6m, and handed it to Bao-yu. The

envelope bore the inscription: ‘To My Honoured Uncle’.
‘Funny,’ said Bao-yu. ‘I thought I was supposed to be his father!’
‘What?’ retorted Aroma.
‘Don’t you remember, the year before last when he sent me that white Autumn Crab-blossom, he signed himself my "Dutiful and Affectionate Son"? It seems I’ve been demoted to plain Uncle...
‘Honestly!’ exclaimed Aroma. ‘The pair of you should be thoroughly ashamed of yourselves! Fancy a grown man like him passing himself off as your son! He ought to know better! And as for you... Father Bao indeed! Why you’re not even...
Aroma stopped short. She blushed and gave a little smile. Bao-yu knew what she meant.
‘Who knows?’ he quipped. ‘Perhaps he thought of me as his Spiritual Father, like that

> celebrated celibate of yore
> whose children could be numbered by the score...

I only agreed to it because I thought he was quite clever and a likeable sort of fellow; if he’s changed his mind, I really couldn’t care less.’
‘If you want to know, he gives me the creeps,’ Aroma continued, as Bao-yu opened the letter. ‘He’s for ever trying to worm his way in, and looks so shifty about it. I wouldn’t trust him an inch.’
Bao-yu was too absorbed in examining the contents of the letter to take any notice of what she was saying. She studied his face as he read. A frown, then a smile, which soon gave way to a shake of the head, and finally an expression of impatience. When he seemed to have finished, she asked:
‘What’s it all about then?’
By way of response Bao-yu tore the letter into shreds. Aroma thought it wiser to change the subject.
‘Are you planning to do some work after dinner or not?’

‘What a cad!’
She smiled at this capricious reply:
‘Well, what was it about?’
‘Oh who cares! Let’s have dinner. Then I’m going straight to bed. I feel quite sick!’
He told one of the junior maids to light a fire and threw the remains of Yun’s letter into it.
Supper was soon served, but Bao-yu was in no mood for it and only sat there staring glumly in front of him.
After trying every form of pressure and persuasion Aroma finally succeeded in making him swallow a mouthful, only to see him put his bowl down once more and flop listlessly onto his bed. Suddenly he began to cry.
Neither she nor Musk had the slightest idea what was the matter.
"Come on, you’ve got to tell us,’ protested Musk. ‘It’s all this Yun’s fault, or whatever his wretched name is. I can’t imagine what his stupid letter was all about, to have such a queer effect on you, laughing one minute, crying your heart out the next. If you carry on in this strange way much longer, you’ll worry us to death, indeed you will!’
She was on the verge of tears herself. Aroma could not help smiling:
‘Musky dear, don’t you go making things worse, *please*. He’s got quite enough on his mind as it is. Unless ‘of course you want people to think the letter had something to do with you...’
‘Well, *that’s* a stupid remark I must say!’ replied Musk. ‘*You* don’t know what it said, anyway. It might have been anything. Why drag *me* into it? Unless of course it’s got something to do’ with you...
Before Aroma could reply there was a splutter of laughter from the bed and Bao-yu sat up, gave his clothes a shake and said to them both:
‘Come on, that’s’ enough. Let’s ‘go to sleep. I’ve got to work early in the morning.’ With these words he settled himself down and went to sleep.
The night passed uneventfully, and next morning, after completing his toilet, he set off for school. He had just walked 6ut of the doorway when he remembered something and, calling to Tealeaf to wait, turned back.
‘Musk!’
She came hurrying out.
‘What’s the matter?’
‘If Yun comes today, tell him not to make a nuisance of himself here again or I’ll report him to Her Old Ladyship and Sir Zheng.’

‘I will.’
Bao-yu set off once more, and was on his way out when who should come bustling in but J ia Yun himself. When he saw Bao-yu he promptly saluted and said:
‘My heartiest congratulations, Uncle!’
Bao-yu took this as a reference to th,e business contained in the previous day’s letter and replied curtly:
‘You tactless meddling fool! It makes no difference to you if there are things people care about.
‘But Uncle!’ protested Yun with a smug smile. ‘If you don’t believe me, take a look for yourself. The crowds are outside the gate.’
‘What are you talking about?’ snapped Bao-yu, the anger rising in his voice.
At that moment a wave of shouting and cheering came wafting in from the street outside.
‘Hear that!’ exclaimed Jia Yun. ‘*Now* will you believe me?’
Bao-yu was more perplexed than ever. He could distinguish a few words above the general din:
‘Have you people no manners? What do you mean by coming here and making this racket?’
Another voice replied:
‘The hand that raised Sir Jia has given us the privilege of bearing tidings other houses would be only too glad of receiving!’
Bao-yu understood at last that his father’s promotion had been officially announced, and that the din outside the gates was coming from a crowd of professional well-wishers (their joy made the more vocal by the expectation of a tip). He was delighted and hurried on out of the Garden, only to be cornered again by Jia Yun.
‘Happy Uncle? Needless to say the joy would be doubled if we could only announce your betrothal as well...’
Bao-yu blushed fiercely and spat in Jia Yun’s face:
‘Ugh! Why don’t you clear off? You make m,e sick!’
Jia Yun blushed too.
‘What’s this? I can see you’re a little. .
‘A little what?’ asked Bao-yu angrily.
But Jia Yu,n’s nerve failed him and he left his remark unfinished.
Bao-yu hurried off to school, where Dai-ru greeted him with a smile:
‘I have just heard the good news, my boy. I must say, I am somewhat surprised to see you here at all today.’
‘I thought I should report to you first, sir, before going to offer my congratulations,’ replied Bao-yu with a polite smile.
‘I see. Well, no need to attend class today. Take a day’s grace. But please try not to fritter it away in that garden of yours. At your age, though you may not be able to take an active part in family affairs, I am sure you would benefit greatly from the company of your older cousins.’
‘Yes, sir.’
Bao-yu returned home. As he was approaching the inner gate of Grandmother Jia’s apartment, he encountered Li Gui coming in the opposite direction.
‘I’m glad you’re back,’ said Li Gui, halting by his side’ with a smile. ‘I was on my way to school to fetch you.’
‘Who told you to?’ asked Bao-yu.
‘Her Old Ladyship sent someone round to your place,’ replied Li Gui, ‘but the maids said you had already gone to school, so she sent someone with instructions for me to arrange a few days off school for you. I hear they are having players over for the festivities. Anyway, thanks, you’ve saved me a’journey.’
B~o-yu went in, to find Grandmother Jia~s front courtyard overflbwing with maids and serving-women, ~’t’heir loyal faces beaming with pleasure and excitement’:
‘You’re late, Master Bao! You’d better hurry on in and congratulate Her Old Ladyship!’
Bao-yu’s face lit up. When he entered the room, he found Grandmother Jia with Dai-yu and Xiang-yun sitting to her left and right up on the kang, while assembled down below were Ladies Xing and Wang, Tan-chun, Xichun, Li Wan, Xi-feng, Li Wan’s two cousins Wen and Qi, and Lady Xing’s niece Xing Xiu-yan. He noticed that Bao-chai, Bao-qin and Ying-chun were not there.
Overjoyed to see such a gathering, Bao-yu offered his congratulations first to Grandmother Jia, then to his mother and Lady Xing, and then greeted the rest of the family. He turned to Dai-yu with- a smile and said:
‘Are you quite recovered now, coz?’
‘Yes, thank you,’ replied Dai-yu, with a hint of a smile. ‘And you? I heard that you were not very well yourself.’

‘Yes, I had a sudden pain in my heart that night. It’s been better for quite a while, but I’ve been having to go to school every day, so I haven’t been able to come over and see you.
Before he had even finished speaking, Dai-yu turned away to talk to Tan-chun. Xi-feng was standing near them and observed sarcastically:
‘I thought you two were meant to be inseparable? The way you *talk* anyone would think you were strangers. Still, I suppose

His to honour,
Hers to obey...’

Everyone laughed. The colour flew into Dai-yu’s face and at first she was quite speechless with embarrassment. But thinking that some sort of reply was expected of her, she finally came out with:
‘Who’d expect *you* to understand...
which seemed to amuse everyone even more.
After a moment’s reflection Xi-feng realized that her joke had been in rather poor taste, and she was about to introduce a fresh topic of conversation, in an attempt to clear the air a little, when Bao-yu suddenly turned to Daiyu and said:
‘Coz, do you know what that tactless, blundering fool Yun tried to...’ But whatever it was he had been going to say, he thought better of it. There was a puzzled laugh from the others. Someone said:
‘What are you talking about?’
Dai-yu was as much in the dark as they were and smiled awkwardly. Bao-yu extricated himself by launching off at another tangent:
‘I heard just now that someone is planning to send over some players. When are they coming, does anyone know?’
They all stared at him in amazement and laughed. It was Xi-feng who replied:
‘You’re the one who’s heard. Why ask us?’
‘I’d better go and check,’ he said promptly.
‘Now don’t go getting into mischief out there,’ warned his grandmother. ‘You don’t want the crowd to make fun of you, do you? And remember, this is a very special day for your father, and if he comes home and finds you gadding about, there’s sure to be trouble.’
‘Yes, Grannie,’ replied Bao-yu, and effected his escape.
When he had gone, Grandmother Jia asked Xi-feng:
‘What’s all this about sending players?’
‘Uncle Wang Zi-sheng’s family,’ replied Xi-feng, ‘want to do something to congratulate you and Uncle Zheng and Auntie. They’ve hired a new troupe of young actors specially, and they say that the day after tomorrow is a lucky one.
Xi-feng laughed:
‘And it is too, in more ways than one.
She looked at Dai-yu and smiled. Dai-yu smiled shyly back.
‘Of course!’ exclaimed Lady Wang. ‘It’s our niece 5 birthday!’
When Grandmother Jia had taken in what they were saying she laughed out loud:
‘It just goes to show how absent-minded I’m getting in my old age! It’s a good thing I’ve Secretary Feng here to keep me organized. Well, what could be better.: they can celebrate your Uncle Zheng’s promotion, and we can celebrate your birthday at the same time!’
This had everyone laughing, and it was proposed and carried unanimously that with such an apt way of putting things, the old lady positively had a right to enjoy such prodigious good fortune.
Bao-yu had returned in time to hear about the party and was beside himself with joy. They all sat down to lunch in an atmosphere of great excitement. After lunch, Jia Zheng returned from giving thanks at court, and having performed his ceremonial prostrations in the family shrine, came in to kotow before Grandmother Jia. He rose to his feet and said a few words before leaving to pay various official calls.
Over the next day or two there was constant bustle and confusion, as a stream of relatives besieged Rong-guo House. Horses and carriages thronged the main entrance, and in every corner important-looking gentlemen in starched official hats trimmed with sable sat waiting their turn. Truly:

Where flowers bloom,
Bees and butterflies abound;
Skies and oceans swell

Two days later, the players, on the instructions of Wang Zi-sheng and other relations, arrived early in the morning to set up their mobile stage in Grandmother Jia's courtyard, facing the main hall. The Jia menfolk, in full dress, entertained their relatives in the open courtyard, where more than ten tables had been laid. A special glass play-viewing screen had been put up between the courtyard and the gallery overlooking it from the north side, and four tables had been laid in the enclosed space, to give the
ladies a chance of seeing the plays, and particularly for Grandmother Jia's benefit (as she was more enthusiastic about the whole venture than anyone else). Aunt Xue was installed at the head of the table of honour, with her sister Lady Wang and her niece Bao-qin, while Grandmother Jia sat at the head of the table opposite with Lady Xing and her niece Xiu-yan. The two remaining tables were still empty, and Grandmother Jia sent word for the girls to hurry up.
Presently Dai-yu arrived, ushered in by Xi-feng and a convoy of maids. She had chosen one or two of her newer things to wear, and as she came into the enclosure she looked exactly like the Goddess of the Moon descending to Earth. She greeted Grandmother Jia and her aunts with a shy smile, and Xiang-yun and the two Li sisters asked her to Sit at the head of their table. Her polite refusals were soon over-ruled by Grandmother Jia:
'Go on, you *must*, dear. After all, this is *your* day too!'
'Really?' exclaimed Aunt Xue, rising to her feet. 'Is Miss Lin celebrating something today as well?'
Grandmother Jia laughed:
'It's her birthday!'
'Oh goodness, I quite forgot! How awful of me!' Aunt Xue went up to Dai-yu: 'I'm *so* sorry. I hope you'll forgive me for being so forgetful. I must ask Bao-qin to call on you later and wish you happy returns properly.'
'Please don't go to such trouble on my account,' murmured Dai-yu with a smile. She looked around her as they all sat down, and noticed that Bao-chai had not come.
'I hope Cousin Chai isn't ill or anything. Why couldn't she come today?'
'She was going to,' replied Aunt Xue. 'But we needed someone to look after things at home, so in the end she had to stay behind.'
Dai-yu flushed and said with a slightly puzzled smile:
'Surely now that Cousin Pan's married there's no need for her to stay at home? She probably didn't feel in the mood for all the noise and excitement. I'm sorry she didn't come. I miss her such a lot.'
Aunt Xue smiled:
'How very sweet of you, dear. She thinks of you all a great deal too. In a day or two I must tell her to come over and have a chat.'
The maids were already pouring wine and setting out dishes on the tables, while outside in the courtyard the show had begun. It opened, predictably enough, with a couple of festive pieces. The third selection, however, turned out to be something of a novelty. A chorus of Golden Pages and Jade Maidens came onto the stage, fairy streamers fluttering and flags aloft, to reveal in their midst a gorgeously attired lady, her head draped in black, her costume shimmering with the celestial hues of the Rainbow Skirt and Feathered Jacket. She (or rather he, for the part was played by a female impersonator) sang a short aria and then left the stage.
None of the family could identify the piece at. all, but they overheard one of the guests saying:
'That was "The Transfiguration", from one of their latest productions, *"The Palace of Pearls"*. It tells the story of Chang E, who comes down to earth from her palace in the moon and is about to give her hand to her mortal lover when the Goddess of Mercy opens her eyes to the truth, and she dies before the marriage can take place. In that scene, she is being wafted up to the moon. Didn't you catch the words of her aria?

'Tis Love that rules the minds of men,
And of this Truth Eternal
Obscures all trace:
That even harvest moons must wane
And purest beauty vernal
Fade from grace.
Alas, 'twas Mortal Love
That veiled my sight,

And all but stole me
From my Orb of Light.'

Next on the programme was 'A Wife Eats Husks', from *'The Story of the Lute'*, followed by 'Bodhidharma and his Disciple Crossing the River', from *'The Pilgrim's Path'*. This last scene was full of the most spectacular feats of acrobatic mime and other phantasmagorical effects. The excitement had just reached its height when one of the Xue family's servants, his face dripping with sweat, burst into the courtyard auditorium and hurried over to Xue Ke's table:
'Master Ke! Come home quickly! And send word in to Madam that she must come too. It's very urgent!'
'What's happened?' asked Xue Ke.
'I'll tell you when we get home, sir!' panted the boy.
Without even stopping to thank his hosts, Xue Ke followed the boy out of the courtyard, sending one of the Jia maids in with a message to the ladies' enclosure. When Aunt Xue heard the news, she went white in the face. Taking Bao-qin with her, she made a distracted farewell and went straight out to her carriage, leaving the whole assembly in a state of high alarm.
'We had better send someone over with them,' said Grandmother Jia. 'I am sure everyone is most anxious to learn what this is all about.'
They all agreed.

The players continued with their programme. But we must leave them and follow Aunt Xue, who on her arrival at home saw two yamen runners waiting in the inner gateway. With them were some employees from the family pawnshop.
'When Mrs Xue arrives,' they were saying, 'she'll be able to explain everything.'
When the yamen runners saw this elderly lady sweeping up to the gate with her large retinue of male and female attendants, and realized the distinguished position of the. person they were dealing with, they stood to attention and let her pass. Aunt Xue went on through the reception hall and could already hear the sound of heavy wailing coming from her daughter-in-law's apartment. She quickened her step. Bao-chai came out to meet her, her face wet with tears.
'Have you heard, Mama? Please don't panic! We must try to *do* something!'
They went inside together. Aunt Xue had already been told the main facts by one of the servants on her way in, and was still sobbing and trembling from the shock.
'But *who? Who* was it?' she asked agitatedly.
'Madam,' said one of the servants, 'details like that are not going to make much difference at present. The law says "a life for a life". So we must think what to do.'
'Think!' cried Aunt Xue hysterically. 'What's the earthly good of thinking at a time like this?'
'The best thing as we see it,' continued the servant, is this. First, send young Master Ke with some money tonight to visit Mr Pan in prison. Then, first thing tomorrow, Master Ke must get himself a good scrivener, someone well-versed in legal terminology. He must offer him a good fee to make sure this death-sentence is quashed..~ Then, when that's been done, we must ask one of the Jia gentlemen here to pull a few strings. But first of all, we must tip the yamen runners outside a few taels. Then we can get on with the rest of the plan.'
Aunt Xue was not convinced.
'Just find the man's family,' she said. 'Give them whatever they want for funeral expenses and compensation. If they don't press the charge, surely he'll be let off lightly?'
Bao-chai's voice could be heard through the door-curtain:
'No, Mama, that will never do. The m6re money we hand out the more trouble we'll cause in the long run. We should do as the boy says.'
'What have I left to live for?' sobbed Aunt Xue. 'Let me go there and see him once! Then the two of us can die together!'
Bao-chai begged her to take heart, and at the same time called out for the boy to set off with Xue Ke at once. The maids helped Aunt Xue indoors again. Xue Ke came by on his way out.
'Send someone home with ~ letter as soon as you have any news,' Bao-chai instructed him. 'You must stay there. We're counting on you.'
Xue Ke promised to do his utmost and left.
While Bao-chai applied herself once more to the task of soothing her agitated mother, Xia Jin-gui took the

opportunity of launching an undisturbed attack on Caltrop:
'So a murder was nothing to this family, was it?' she screamed at her. 'You all came straight up to town afterwards as if nothing had happened, did you? Well it looks as if you spoke once too often, Miss Swanky Panky! Because this time it's the real thing, and look at you! Where's all your money and all your fine friends and posh relatives *now?* You're all so scared you don't know if you're coming or going! And in a few days, when they put Pan away, then I suppose you'll bugger off and leave me here to carry the can single-handed!'
She broke into one of her dramatic wails. Aunt Xue heard every word and was so furious that she fainted. Bao-chai was at her wits' end. And in the midst of this pandemonium one of Lady Wang's senior maids arrived, to ask 'if there was any news'. This presented Bao-chai with an additional problem. She was fully aware of her delicate position since the official betrothal visit a few days previously, and knew that strictly speaking she should shun all contact with her future bridegroom's family (including the domestic staff). However, the fact that the betrothal was still not finally settled, and the nature of the present emergency, seemed to justify a temporary waiving of the rules.
'We don't know the full story yet,' she said to the maid. 'All we've heard is that my brother has killed someone and that he has been arrested by the local magistrate. We don't know exactly what kind of homicide he has been found guilty of, but Master Ke has gone to find **Out.** We should have more definite news in a day or two and will let Her Ladyship know straight away. Please thank her for her kind inquiry and say that at a later stage we'll be sure to need all the support Sir She and Sir Zheng can give us.'
The maid returned with this message.
The next two days were spent by Aunt Xue and Baochai waiting in unbearable suspense. At last on the third day a boy came back with a letter from Xue Ke, which he gave to a maid to hand to the ladies. Bao-chai opened it, and this is what she read:
'Pan's case is "fatal bodily harm by mischance", *not* intentional homicide". I lodged an appeal in my own name first thing this morning and am still waiting for the magistrate's rescript. Pan bungled his original statement, and once the appeal has been approved, we must change his plea at the rehearing. We should be able to get him off.
'I urgently need TLs. 500**.** Have the pawnshop forward it *without delay*. Tell Aunt not to worry. The boy can tell you the rest.'
When Bao-chai had finished reading the letter aloud to her, Aunt Xue wiped her eyes and said:
'His life hangs in the balance, doesn't it?'
'Before you go upsetting yourself all over again, Mama,' said Bao-chai, 'let's send for the boy and ask him what *he* knows.'
A maid was sent to fetch the boy. When he came in, Aunt Xue told him to give them a full account of everything he had heard.
'The evening we arrived,' he began, 'when I heard what Mr Pan told Master Ke, I nearly died of fright...
But for the rest of the account, please turn to the next chapter.

CHAPTER 86

Bribery induces an old mandarin to tamper
with the course of justice
And a discourse on the Qin provides a young lady
with a vehicle for romantic feelings

It was told in the last chapter how Bao-chai read Xue Ke's letter aloud to her mother, who then summoned the boy and told him to ~peat whatever Xue Pan had said about his misadventure.
'I couldn't make out every word, ma'am,' he began, 'but I did hear Mr Pan tell Master Ke that...'
He glanced quickly round the room, and having satisfied himself that there was no one else present, continued:
that he couldn't stand any more of the terrible scenes at home, and had decided to go on a business trip in the South. He knew someone in this town about seventy miles south of the capital, and was thinking of asking him along on his travels. On his way to this man's house, who should he meet but that fellow Jiang Yu-han he used to be friendly with, on his way to the capital with some young actors. The two of them went into a bar for a jug of wine and a bite to eat, and that's when things started to go wrong. The waiter

kept making eyes at Jiang, which made Mr Pan angry. Well, Jiang left that same day. But the next day, Mr Pan took this other man - the one he was planning to travel with - to the same bar for a drink. After a few rounds he remembered the waiter's cheeky behaviour and made a point of complaining about the wine. The waiter took a long time coming with a fresh jug; Mr Pan picked up his cup and aimed it at the waiter's face. Well, the waiter turned out to be a daring sort of rogue himself he stuck his head out and challenged Mr Pan to hit him. Next thing, wham! Mr Pan smashed the cup right down on top of his head. Blood came spurting out, and the waiter went down, cursing and swearing. Then he came over all quiet...'
'But why on earth did nobody try to stop them?' asked Aunt Xue.
'I didn't hear Mr Pan say anything about that, ma'am. That's all I know.'
'All right. You may go and rest now.
'Thank you ma'am.'
So saying, the boy went out.
Aunt Xue went first to her sister and entrusted her with the task of enlisting Jia Zheng's support. When Lady Wang brought the matter up and gave Jia Zheng a detailed account of what had happened, he hummed and hawed and said that he could do nothing until Xue Ke's appeal had gone through the normal channels and the judge had issued his rescript.
Aunt Xue had the five hundred taels weighed out in the family pawnshop and gave it to the boy to deliver posthaste to Xue Ke.
Three days later, the letter they were waiting for arrived. It was handed to Aunt Xue, who setit a lunior maid at once to fetch Bao-chai. She hurried over, and this is what she read:
'Dear Aunt. Tls. 500 received and distributed as tips among the yamen staff. Pan is being reasonably treated in jail, so please don't worry.
'Our problem is that the people here are being very awkward. Neither the dead man's family nor the eye-witnesses will cooperate. Even Pan's so-called friend - the one he invited to travel with him - is on their side. It's especially hard for Li Xiang and myself, as strangers, but luckily we have managed to find a good scrivener who has agreed to help us - for a pretty stiff fee. His advice was that we should get to work on Wu Liang (that's the "friend"). First, since he was being held in custody as a primary witness, we should get someone to stand bail for him; then offer him money to corroborate *our* plea of death by mischance. If Wu refused to cooperate we were to try accusing *him* of being the murderer himself and of using an outsider as a scapegoat. He'd be too scared then not to play along.
'So far so good. We got Wu out on bail, bribed the family and various other witnesses, and lodged our appeal the day before yesterday. The rescript was issued today. It speaks for itself.'
Bao-chai went on to read out the copy of the appeal and appended rescript.

APPEAL

brought by *Xue Ke*, younger cousin of and proxy for the defendant, *Xue Pan*, wrongfully convicted of the Intentional Homicide by Blows of *Zhang San*, late of this county.

STATEMENT OF FACTS: The defendant, registered domicile Nanking, at present resident in the capital, on the ___of the ___month, left home intending to do business in the Southern
Provinces. Not many days later, his servant returned home with the news that the defendant had been involved in an incident in which another party had lost his life. The appellant came hither in all haste, to discover that the above-mentioned Mr *Zhang* had indeed met his death at the hand of the defendant, but that it was a case of Fatal Bodily Harm by Mischance and not of Intentional Homicide by Blows, as previously alleged.
PLEA: On arrival at the County Jail, the appellant was a witness to the most earnest protestations of innocence on the part of the defendant, and hearty denial of any previous animosity to-wards '*Zhang*, with whom indeed he had not been in the slightest degree acquainted before the incident in question, which had occurred solely as the result of a trivial disagreement over a jug of wine. The defendant, by way of complaint, emptied the contents of his cup onto the floor. At precisely the same instant, the deceased bent down to retrieve some object from an adjacent spot, slipping as he did so, with the unfortunate, but *entirely accidental* consequence that a fatal collision occurred between the defendant's cup and the deceased's *os bregmatis.*

When Your Honour saw fit to apprehend the defendant and subject him to judicial interrogation, his

terror of the rack was so extreme that he rashly admitted the charge of Homicide by Blows, thus bringing upon himself the sentence of Strangulation, with possibility of Commutation to Exile. Your Honour, in your great Wisdom and Clemency, aware no doubt of some latent injustice, has delayed passing sentence until the present time. The defendant, being in custody, is prevented by law from appealing *pro sua parte.* The appellant has therefore been emboldened by considerations of family loyalty to act on his behalf, most humbly and earnestly beseeching Your Honour to reopen the case and subject all parties concerned to a second examination. This would be a magnanimous course of action, and one that would earn the never-ending gratitude and lifelong devotion of the appellant and his entire family.

Bao-chai now came to the judge's rescript, which read as follows:

RESCRIPT

An inquest was held at the scene of the crime, and the evidence heard was conclusive. No torture of any kind was applied to the defendant, who freely admitted the charge, *viz.* Homicide by Blows. His admission of guilt has now been officially entered in the records.

You, the appellant, an outsider with no first-hand knowledge of the case, in presuming to fabricate this unfounded appeal are guilty of contempt of court. In view of the mitigating circumstances of family loyalty, your offence will be overlooked in this instance.

APPEAL REJECTED

'There's no hope left then!' cried Aunt Xue. 'What can we do now?'
'That isn't all,' said Bao-chai. 'There's a P.S.'
She read on:
'For confidential instructions, ask the boy - *urgent.'*
Aunt Xue immediately questioned the boy, who supplied the following information:
'The people at the yamen know how rich we are, ma'am, and Master Ke says we'll have to use family connections here in the capital, and send another large bribe, if we're to get a rehearing and a lighter sentence. He says you must act quickly, ma'am, as delay now could mean hardship for Mr Pan.'
Aunt Xue dismissed the boy and went at once to see her sister again. Lady Wang pleaded strenuously with Jia Zheng, but the most he was prepared to do was send someone to 'have a word' with the judge. He refused to contemplate the use of 'pecuniary considerations'. Aunt Xue, fearing that this gesture would prove ineffective, begged Xi-feng to speak to Jia Lian. The judge's price was high - the figure ran into several thousands of taels; but in the end an agreement was reached, and the way was clear for Xue Ke to proceed with his plan.
The case was officially re-opened, and all the parties concerned were summoned once more to the district yamen - the beadle, eye-witnesses, relatives of the deceased, etc. Xue Pan was brought out from the cells. The clerk of the court called the roll, and the judge ordered the chief beadle to verify the original depositions. Then Mrs Zhang (nee Wang) and Zhang Er, the deceased's mother and uncle, were called to give evidence.
'May't please Yeronner,' began Mrs Zhang, punctuating her delivery with sobs, 'we Zhangs are country folk and live to the south of town. Papa Zhang's been gone these eighteen years. We had the three boys, but our eldest and second have both passed away. The only one as I had left was our third, and now he's gone too!' (More sobs.)
'Twenty-three this year he'd've been, anitplease Yeronner, and still a single lad. He'd took this job at Li's Bar by way 0' helpin' me out, seem' as we'd so little comin' in. It'd've been 'bout midday when this man come to the door-I can see 'im now -"There's been a fight at Li's Bar!" says he, "And your boy's been killed!" My poor heart, Yeronner! I was took that bad! I runned to Li's and there was my boy lyin' on the ground, the blood runnin' out 'is poor 'ead! I tried askin' 'im what 'ad 'appened, but 'e couldn't say nothing, 'e was 'ardly breathin', and then ... well, then 'e was gone! If I could only get my hands on that wickedevilmurderin'
A growl of disapproval rippled through the ranks of the court underlings. Mrs Zhang rapidly kotowed to

the bench:
'All I'm askin' for is reglar justice Yeronner! He was all I 'ad left in the world!'
'Next witness - Gaffer Li!' called the judge peremptorily.
Gaffer Li, proprietor of Li's Bar, came forward and knelt before the bench.
'Was this fellow Zhang employed for casual work on your premises?' asked the judge.
'He was a regular waiter,' replied Li.
'I see here that in your original deposition, as recorded at the Inquest, you state that Xue Pan dealt Zhang San a fatal blow on the head. Tell me, did you personally observe this blow?'
'No, Your Honour. I was behind the counter at the time, in the tap-room. I heard that one of the customers in a private room had ordered some wine. Then a little later I heard that someone had been hurt. I ran in and saw Zhang San lying on the floor. He couldn't speak. I informed the beadle, and sent someone to tell Mrs Zhang. I have no idea how the fight started. There was a gentleman sitting at Mr Xue's table, Your Honour. Perhaps he could supply the necessary information...
'What!' thundered the judge impressively. 'In your original deposition it says quite plainly that you *saw* the incident with your own eyes. Are you now trying to tell me that you saw nothing?'
'When I made that first statement, Your Honour, I was in such a fluster that I must have got my facts a bit muddled...'
Another growl through the ranks.
'Next witness!' ordered the judge.
The next witness was Wu Liang, Xue Pan's 'friend'.
'Tell me,' said the judge, 'were you sitting drinking with the defendant at the time of the crime? Exactly how did the fatal blow occur? Be sure to speak the truth.'
'On the day in question, Your Honour,' replied Wu, 'Mr Xue called at my house and kindly invited me out for a drink. As he was dissatisfied with the 4uality of the wine, he ordered a fresh jug to be brought. But the waiter, Zhang San, refused to oblige. This annoyed Mr Xue, and by way of protest he threw the contents of his cup in the waiter's face. It all happened very fast, and somehow the cup must have slipped from Xue's hand and collided with Zhang's head. This is a true account of the incident as I saw it with my own eyes.'
'Nonsense!' cried the judge. 'Why, at the Inquest the defendant himself admitted to "assaulting Zhang and dealing the fatal blow with the cup", and you verified the admission yourself. This is perjury! Slap his face!'
An answering cry came from the appropriate section of the court, and the punishment was about to be administered, when Wu protested:
'Mr Xue never started a fight, sir! The cup slipped from his hand and collided with Zhang's head! It was all an accident! Question the defendant himself! Have mercy!'
The judge summoned Xue Pan.
'Now, Xue, for the last time, tell me: what was your grudge against Zhang San? And how did he meet with his death? I want the whole truth!'
'Your Honour, be merciful I beseech you!' pleaded Xue Pan. 'I never raised a hand to strike the man. All I did was empty my cup on the floor because he refused to bring the wine I had ordered. Before I knew it, the cup slipped from my hand and struck him on the head. I did all I could to staunch the wound, but it was hopeless. The loss of blood was so great that he died in a matter of minutes. At the Inquest I was in such fear of torture that I made a false confession of assault. I beg Your Honour to show mercy accordingly!'
'Miserable wretch!' bellowed the judge. 'You have already pleaded guilty to intentional assault. Are you now trying to say that it was no more than an *accidental collision?'*
He went on in this fashion, making a series of suitably august noises, threatening Pan with the rod one minute and the rack the next, if he would not confess. This time, however, Pan persisted in his denial.
The coroner was now called upon to make public the results of his post-mortem.
'May it please Your Honour, I have duly examined the corpse of Zhang San, and find no trace of injury but a single scalp-wound, caused by a porcelain artifact. The wound is approximately one and three-quarter inches in length, penetrating to a depth ~f half an inch. The bregmatic bone has sustained a fracture approximately one third of an inch in length. The type of wound points unmistakably to a collision of an accidental nature.'
The judge checked the coroner's certificate, which (as he knew quite well) had been altered by his clerk, and without raising any objections casually asked all concerned to sign their statements.
'But Yeronner!' wailed Mrs Zhang. 'What about all them other wounds? Ever so many there was! Coronary said so himself last time, I remember! Where've they all got to now?'

‘Foolish woman!’ exclaimed the judge. ‘Here is the certificate, duly signed - see for yourself.’
He called the dead man’s uncle forward (a more cooperative witness):
‘Zhang Er, will you tell the court how many wounds there were on your nephew’s corpse?’
‘Just the one on his skull, sir,’ replied Zhang.
The judge turned to Mrs Zhang:
‘What further need have you of proof!’
He told the clerk of the court to hand Mrs Zhang the certificate, and instructed the chief beadle and Zhang Er to explain it to her. The other documents in the case were now collated - the proceedings of the inquest, duly authenticated with the signatures of those present at the time, and the depositions of the witnesses, which were now unanimous in stating that there had been no quarrel, *ergo* no assault, *ergo* Xue Pan was only guilty of ‘causing fatal bodily harm by mischance’, a lesser degree of manslaughter redeemable by payment of a fine. The parties were now required to affix their signature or mark to the document, Xue Pan was detained until confirmation of his sentence was received, and Wu Liang and his guarantor were released. The court was adjourned.
As the judge was leaving, Mrs Zhang broke into another untimely bout of wailing and sobbing, and he ordered the court lictors to send her packing. Uncle Zhang also did what he could to bring her to her senses:
‘It really was an accident,’ he said, ‘so why hold an innocent man guilty? His Honour has passed sentence now, so for goodness’ sake pipe down.’
Xue Ke had been waiting outside, and was greatly relieved to hear that all had gone according to plan. He sent a letter home, saying that he planned to stay on until the confirmation came through, when he would pay Xue Pan’s fine.
Walking through the town later that day, he became aware of a buzz of excited conversation in the street:
‘Have you heard? One of the Imperial Concubines has passed away, and there’s to be a three-day Recess at Court

Since the Imperial Mausoleum was not far from the town, Xue Ke thought to himself, the judge would now be busy preparing for the funeral and repairing the road with **yellow** earth for the procession. He would hardly have time to think about routine legal matters, and consequently he himself would achieve little by hanging around. So he went to the jail and explained to Pan that he was going home for a few days. Pan was glad for his mother’s sake, and sent a brief note to reassure her. ‘I’m fine,’ he wrote. ‘A few more taels in the right pockets and I’ll be home! But be sure to keep the cash flowing!’ Xue Ke left the boy Li Xiang behind just in case, and set off home straight away.
On arrival, he gave Aunt Xue a full account of how the judge had managed the transition from ‘assault’ to ‘mischance’.
‘All that’s left now,’ he finished by saying, ‘is to give the Zhangs a bit more money. Then, when the commutation is confirmed, it will all be over
Aunt Xue breathed a sigh of relief.
‘I was hoping you would be able to come home,’ she said. ‘I have been wanting to go over and thank the Jias for all that they’ve done, and I thought it would be nice if I could go and keep an eye on things for Aunt Wang and spend some time with the girls. With the death of the Zhou’ Concubine the family is away every day and they must be rather lonely at home. But I couldn’t go until now because there was no one here to take charge.’
‘The funny thing is that on my way here I heard it was the Jia Concubine that had died,’ said Xue Ke. ‘That’s why I came back in such a hurry - though I must say I found it hard to credit.’
‘She was ill a while ago,’ replied Aunt Xue. ‘But she recovered, and I have heard nothing about her being ill since. It’s odd, though: Lady Jia was not feeling well a few days ago, and whenever she closed her eyes she had a vision of Her Grace. Everyone was most concerned at first, and they even sent someone to Court to inquire, but were told that Her Grace was in good health Then, three days ago, in the evening, Lady Jia suddenly said out loud:
"Why have you come all this way on your own to see me, Your Grace?" This time they put it down to her illness and didn’t take it seriously. "If you don’t believe me," said Lady Jia, "let me tell you what Her Grace said: Prosperity may all too soon be spent; draw back, draw back before it is too late." They thought she was imagining it all - it was just the sort of thing a lady of her years would be preoccupied with, after all - and paid no attention. So can you imagine the panic the next morning, when somehow they heard from Court that one of the Concubines was critically ill, and that all members of the family with titles were to proceed to the Palace! They were in the most dreadful state when they set off! But before they had even

left the palace, we heard that it was the Zhou Concubine. It is odd, don't you agree, that the rumour you heard should have tallied so exactly with Lady Jia's premonitions?'

'The public always gets its facts mixed up,' commented Bao-chai, 'and the Jias are so sensitive about the whole thing that they've only to hear the words "Her Grace" mentioned to start jumping to the most dire conclusions. It nearly always turns out to be a false alarm. During this latest excitement, I was chatting to one or two of their maids and older serving-women, and they told me they'd known all along that it couldn't possibly have been Her Grace. I asked one of them how they could be so sure, and she told me of something that happened several years ago.

'It was the first month of the year, and there was a fortune-teller from one of the provinces here in the capital, who had been recommended to the family for his great accuracy. Lady Jia gave instructions to slip Her Grace's Eight Stems and Branches in with some of the maids', and to ask this man to tell their fortunes. He singled hers Out at once.' "There must be some mistake here", he said. "I see that this young lady was born on the first of the first month. If the Stem and Branch of her natal hour were correct, she would have to be a person of high estate, and not a servant in this household." Sir Zheng and the others urged him to cast the horoscope anyway, s6 he went on: "The Cyclical Year Jia *Shen* (Wood + Metal), the Prime Month *Bing Yin* (Fire + Wood). Both Failure and Decline are present. Although the Year Branch *Shen* shows Rank and Wealth, as it is not her fate to be raised within the household, the aspect of this Branch is not particularly favourable. The Day *Yi Mao* (Wood + Wood), commencement of Spring, Wood at its zenith. We have here a conflict, a Configuration of Peers. In this case it enhances the subject, just as fine timber is only fashioned into an instrument of true greatness when it encounters the axe. The Hour Stem *Xin* (Metal) indicates Nobility, while the Hour Branch *Si* (Fire) indicates Rank and Fortune again, this time the High Degree known as *Lucky Horse Rides the Sky*. The Day Conjunction shows Supreme Rank and the Forces of Heaven and the Moon presiding over her fate. She will be favoured with residence in the Imperial Bedchamber. If the Hour Stem and Branch are correct, this subject must be an Imperial Concubine."

'As the maid said,' Bao-chai continued, 'the horoscope fitted Her Grace perfectly. They remembered the end part, too. "Alas!" he said, "such Glory cannot endure. When Hare meets Tiger, and Wood meets Wood, in a *Mao* Month of a *Yin* Year, her Peers will outshine her, the Decline will reach its nadir, and the fine wood, through being too prettily carved, will lose its heart and strength.)) Although the family in their panic forgot all about this final prediction, the maid remembered. As she said to Cousin Wan, "this is a *Yin* Year, and we've already passed the *Mao* Month, so it couldn't be Her Grace!"

Bao-chai had hardly finished when Xue Ke exclaimed:

'Forget about the Jias for a minute; if there is such a good fortune-teller around, why not ask him about Pan? Perhaps he could tell us what evil force has crossed his path and brought him such bad luck this year? Give me Pan's Stems and Branches, and I'll go and find out if the future holds any mote upsets in store for him.'

'The fortune-teller was from one of the provinces. Who knows where he is now?' replied Bao-chai.

During this conversation, they had already started to pack Aunt Xue's things. She went over to the main mansion, to find that, as she had supposed, Li Wan, Tan-chun and the girls had been left on their own. They welcomed her and asked. after Xue Pan. They were greatly relieved when she told them that he was out of danger and only waiting for confirmation of his sentence.

'Mother was saying only yesterday,' said Tan-chun, 'that she'd always relied on you in the past, Auntie, whenever there was any sort of crisis, to come over and keep an eye on things. But this time she felt she could hardly ask you, as you had enough to cope with. She was rather uneasy about leaving us here on our own, all the same.

'I've been worrying about you myself,' replied Aunt Xue. 'But you know how it's been this last week or two. Your Cousin Ke has been away trying to sort out Pan's affairs, and really 1 couldn't leave Bao-chai on her own, she'd never be able to manage. Especially as Pan's young wife is so incompetent. What with one thing and another, I simply haven't been able to get away. The only reason Ke has been able to come home and relieve me now is that the judge in charge of the case is going to be tied up with the Zhou Concubine's funeral arrangements for a few days'.

'We'd be so pleased if you could stay for a day or two,' said Li Wan.

Aunt Xue nodded.

'I should very much like to be here and keep you girls company. The only thing is, I am a little worried that Bao-chai may feel lonely without me.

'Well why not ask her to come over as well?' suggested Xi-chun.

Aunt Xue gave a little laugh.

'Oh, I couldn't do that.'

‘But why not? She used to live here, didn’t she?’
Li Wan replied for Aunt Xue.
‘You don’t understand. It’s not the same now. They’re very busy at present, so she can’t possibly come.
Xi-chun supposed that this was the real reason for Baochai’s absence, and dropped the matter.
As they were talking, Grandmother Jia and the rest of the family arrived back from their visit of condolence. When they saw that Aunt Xue was there, preliminary courtesies were dropped for once and everyone wanted to know the latest in the Pan affair. Aunt Xue told them the whole story. Bao-yu was present, and pricked up his ears when he heard Jiang Yu-han’s name mentioned. Although he thought it inadvisable to show much interest in front of the others, secretly he asked himself why his old actor-friend had not been to look him up, if he was back in town. Then, noticing that Bao-chai had not accompanied her mother, and trying to imagine what could be keeping her at home, he began to drift into one of his brown studies, and was only aroused and restored to a more cheerful frame of mind by the unexpected arrival of Dai-yu. He stayed for dinner with the others at Grandmother Jia’s. After dinner everyone retired to their respective apartments, except for Aunt Xue, who stayed the night in Grandmother Jia’s guest-room.
Bao-yu returned to **Green** Delights, and was divesting himself of his going-out clothes, when suddenly he remembered the cummerbund Jiang Yu-han had once given him as a first-meeting present.
‘Do you remember that **crimson** cummerbund I gave you?’ he asked Aroma. ‘The one you wouldn’t wear? Have you still got it?’
‘I’ve put it away somewhere. Why do you ask?’
‘Oh, I just wondered.’
‘Didn’t you hear what terrible trouble Mr Pan got into, all because he made friends with such riffraff! Will you never learn? Haven’t you more sense than to go bringing up a thing like that? Instead of filling your head with such stuff, what you should be doing is quietly concentrating on your studies.’
‘Oh for goodness’ sake! I’m not the one that’s got into trouble! I just happened to think of it, that’s all. I couldn’t care less whether you’ve still got it or not. If I’d known you were going to start giving me a lecture...
Aroma smiled.
‘I’m not giving you a lecture. It’s just that you know what people say about actors. Now that you’re studying the classics and learning all the proper rules of behaviour, you should try to conform and get on in the world. When your sweetheart comes along, surely you’ll want to make a good impression then?’
‘Goodness!’ exclaimed Bao-yu, aroused by the mention of the word sweetheart, ‘that reminds me! There was such a crowd at Grannie’s, I didn’t have a chance to speak to Cousin Lin, and she didn’t speak to me either. She left before I did, so she’s probably home by now. I’ll be back in a minute.’
He was gone.
‘Don’t stay too long!’ Aroma called after him. ‘Now I’ve done it! I should never have opened my mouth!’
Bao-yu did not reply, but made his way directly to the Naiad’s House, head bowed in thought. On arrival there, he found Dai-yu at her table, poring over a book.
‘Have you been back long, coz?’ he asked, walking over and standing by her side.
‘As you were ignoring me,’ she said, returning his smile, ‘there was little point in my staying...
He laughed.
‘Everyone was talking at once, and I couldn’t get a word in.’
Looking down at the page open in front of her, Bao-yu found that he couldn’t understand a single character on it. Some of them seemed familiar, like the characters for *Peony* and *Vast;* but on closer inspection he saw that even they had been in some way changed. There was the character for *Hook,* with a *Five* inside it, and a *Nine* and *Big* on top; and there was a *Five* next to a *Six,* with *Wood* below and another *Five at* the very bottom. It was all very puzzling.
‘You must be very advanced, to be able to decipher this esoteric script!’ he said.
Dai-yu gave a little ‘chee!’
‘Not much of a scholar really are you! Fancy never having seen a Qin tablature before!’
‘It’s music! Of course! But why don’t I know any of the characters? Do *you* know what they mean?’
‘No, of course not; that’s why I’m reading it...’
‘Do you *really?* I never knew you could play. Did you know about the Qins hanging on the wall in the main library? There are quite a few. I remember the year before last Father had a friend who was a Qin player - Antiquarian Ji I think be was called. Father asked him to play a piece, but when he tried the instruments he said they were none of them fit to play. He said that if Father really wanted to hear him play,

he would come back another day with his own instrument. But he never did. I think he must have decided Father was tone-deaf. Well! So all this time you've been hiding your light under a bushel!'
'Oh no,' replied Dai-yu. 'I'm no good. It just happened that a day or two ago, when I was feeling a little better, I was looking through my bookcase and came across an old Qin Handbook. It seemed such a fine thing, and made such fascinating reading. It began with a preface on the general philosophy of the Qin, which I found most profound, and then it explained the technical side in great detail. I realized that playing the Qin is a form of meditation and spiritual discipline handed down to us from the ancients.
'I had a few lessons when we lived in Yangchow, and made some progress. But since then I've become so out of

practice, and now my fingers are all "overgrown with brambles", as they say! The first Qin Handbook I found only had the names of the Airs, it didn't have the words and music. But now I've found another with the Airs written out in full. It's so interesting! Of course, I realize that I shall never be able to do justice to the score. To think what the great Master Musicians of the past could do - like Master Kuang, whose playing could summon wind and thunder, dragon and phoenix! And to think that Confucius could tell from his Music Master Xiang's first notes that he was listening to a musical portrait of King Wen! To play a Rhapsody of Hills and Streams and share its inner meaning with a fellow music-lover...

Dai-yu fluttered her eyelids and slowly bowed her head.
Bao-yu was completely carried away:
'Oh coz! How wonderful it all sounds! But I'm afraid I still don't understand these peculiar characters. Please teach me how to read some of them.'
'I don't need to teach you. It's easy.'
'But I'm such a fool! Please help me! Take that one there - all I can make 6ut is *Hook*, with *Big* on top and *Five* in the middle.'
Dai-yu laughed at him.
'The *Big* and *Nine* on top mean you stop the string with the thumb of your left hand at the *ninth* fret. The *Hook* and *Five* mean you *hook* the middle finger of your right hand slightly and pull the *fifth* string towards you. So you see, it's not what we would call a character, it's more a cluster of signs telling you what the next note is and how to play it. It's very easy. Then there are signs for all the graces - the narrow and the wide *vibrato*, the rising and the falling *glissando*, the mordent,, the *tremulo*, the falling *glissando* with open-string drone...
Bao-yu was beside himself with joy.
'As you understand it so perfectly, coz', why don't we start studying the Qin together?'
'The essence of the Qin,' replied Dai-yu, (is restraint. It was created in ancient times to help man purify himself and lead a gentle and sober life, to quell all wayward passions and to curb every riotous impulse. If you wish to play, then you must first

seek out a quiet chamber,
a studio with distant view,
or upper room;
or some secluded nook
'mong rocks and trees,
on craggy mountain-top,
by water's edge...

Let the weather be clear and calm, a gentle breeze, a moonlit night. Light some incense, and sit in silent meditation. Empty the mind of outward thoughts. Poise Breath and Blood in Perfect Harmony. Your Soul may now commune with the Divine, and enter into that mysterious Union with the Way.

'As the ancients said, true music-lovers have always been few. If there is no one able to share your music's true delight, then sit alone, and

serenade the breeze and moonlight,
hymn the ancient pines
and weather-worn rocks;
let wild monkeys and venerable cranes
hear your song,

rather than the vulgar mob, whose dull ears would only sully the precious virtue of the Qin.
'So much for the setting. The next two essentials are finger-technique and touch. And before you think of playing, be sure to dress in a suitable style - preferably in a swansdown cape or other antique robe. Assume the dignified manner of the ancients, a manner in keeping with the chosen instrument of the sages. Wash your hands. Light the incense. Sit on the edge of your couch. Place the Qin on the table before you, and sit with your chest
opposite the fifth fret. Raise both hands slowly and gracefully. You are now ready, in body and mind, to begin.
'You must while playing observe carefully the dynamic markings - *piano, forte, allegro, adagio* - and maintain a relaxed but serious manner at all times.'
'Goodness me!' cried Bao-yu. 'I was thinking we could do it for fun! If it's as complicated as that, I'm not sure I'd be up to it!'
While they were talking Nightingale came in, and on seeing Bao-yu in the room, inquired with a smile:
'To what are we to attribute this joyful event, Master Bao?'
'Cousin Dai has just been teaching me about the Qin. It's as though scales had fallen from my eyes! I could go on listening for ever!'
'I didn't mean that,' said Nightingale. 'What I meant was, it's so rarely that we see you at all nowadays, I wondered if something out of the ordinary had happened to bring you here today?'
'I suppose it must seem like that,' replied Bao-yu. 'But the only reason I've not been round more often is that I know Cousin Dai has not been well, and thought it best not to trouble her. And then I've been having to go to school...

'Well,' interrupted Nightingale, 'Miss Lin has only just started to feel better, so don't you think you should let her rest now, and not wear her out giving you lessons?'
'Why yes! How thoughtless of me!' he exclaimed with a laugh. 'I was so absorbed in what she was Saying, that it never entered my head she might be tiring herself.'
'I wasn't,' said Dai-yu, smiling. 'Talking about music doesn't tire one, on the contrary, it raises one's spirits. *I* only wonder if what I was saying wasn't beyond you...'
'It doesn't matter,' said Bao-yu. 'I'm sure if we take it slowly I'll be able to understand.'
He stood up.
'But seriously, I think I should leave you in peace now. Tomorrow I'll ask Tan and Xi if they'll come over with me. You three can learn together. I think I'll just sit in. ..'
'Why, you lazy thing!' laughed Dai-yu. 'Imagine if we three *did* learn to play, and you were as ignorant as ever; wouldn't we then be casting our…'
She felt she was allowing herself to become too intimate, and suddenly stopped short. Bao-yu only laughed:
'I'd be happy just to hear you play. I'd do anything for that - even be your swine!'
Dai-yu blushed, but laughed nonetheless. Nightingale and Snowgoose laughed too.

Bao-yu took his leave, and had reached the door, when Ripple appeared, followed by a junior maid bearing a small pot of orchid-plants.
'Her Ladyship has been given four pots of these orchids,' said Ripple, 'and she thought that, as she was so busy at the palace and wouldn't have time to appreciate them, she would give one to you, Master Bao, and one to you, Miss Lin.'
Dai-yu looked at the orchids. Among them were some of the double-headed kind, and looking at these, she had a strange sensation that they *meant* something. Whether it was joy or sorrow that they portended, she could not tell. But it was something of importance. She stood staring at them, lost in thought.

Bao-yu's mind, by contrast, was still full of *vibratos* and *glissandos*, and as he left he said gaily:

'Now that you have these orchids, coz, you'll be able to compose your own *Lonely Qrchid Pavan.* And I'm sure it will be just as good as the one Confucius wrote!'

Dai-yu's heart was too troubled to respond to this parting jest. She walked indoors, and staring once more at her orchids, thought to herself:
'Flowers have their spring-time, a time for fresh blossoms and young leaves. I am young, but frail as the willow that dreads the first breath of autumn... If all turns out for the best, I may grow stronger yet. But if not, my fate will be like that of the fallen petals at spring's end, driven by the rain and tossed in the wind
These sombre reflections brought tears to her eyes. Nightingale was puzzled to see her cry. 'Just now,' she thought to herself, 'when Master Bao was here, they were both in such high spirits; and now look at her! And all she's done is look at those flowers!'

She was still trying in vain to think of some consolation to offer, when one of Bao-chai's serving-women came into the room. But if you wish to know the purpose of her visit, you must read the next chapter.

CHAPTER 87

Autumnal sounds combine with sad remembrances
to inspire a composition on the Qin
And a flood of passion allows evil spirits
to disturb the serenity of Zen

The serving-woman was shown into the Naiad's House. After paying her respects, she delivered a letter for Dai-yu and was taken off to drink tea with the maids. Dai-yu opened her letter. It was from Bao-chai, and began:

'Dear Cousin,

Some malign star must surely have ruled the day of my birth! Misfortune pursues the family at every turn! Cousin Q in and I both fatherless; Mother advanced in years; to which add t

he sounds of bestial ululation that now emanate from our inner apartments at every hour of the day and night; and, to complete this recital of family woes, Brother Pan's recent and most cruel blow! Alas! We are indeed beset with howling winds and torrential rains! As I lie awake at night, tossing on my bed, unable to master this grief, my only consolation is the thought of a kindred spirit such as yours. Ah, dear Cousin! You, I know, have the heart to share my present trials, as once you shared the joys of that golden autumn, when harmony and conviviality prevailed. Then, united beneath the aegis of the Crab-flower Club, we tasted crustacean delicacies and contemplated chrysanthemums. Once, I recall, you questioned the flowers thus:

"Who world disdainer, shares your hiding-place?
Of all the flowers, why do yours bloom so late?"

The lines never fail to rive my heart. For are not you and I late blooms, that tremble at the approaching chill?

'I have endeavoured to compose a lament in four stanzas, to express these feelings of mine. I beg you, read it not as a piece of literary art, but as a simple vessel for my tears.

Your Affectionate Cousin, Bao-chai.'

The poem was attached.

Alas! the seasons turn, and turning bring once more
The chill of autumn to our joy-forsaken door.
We have a flower, *flos matTis* is its name, Heartsease.
Poor Mother! What art can heal thy grief, or ease thy heart?
My soul aches for thee.

The scudding clouds
by biting autumn winds are blown; The courtyard-walk
with withered leaves is thickly strewn. Whither shall I go?
To whom shall I turn? My love is gone,
And only an anguish too deep for words remains.
My heart is desolate.

The mighty sturgeon has his pool;
The stork upon the dam makes his habitation.
Fish in scaly armour, Birds in serried plumes,

find protection. In my distress I question
that inscrutable expanse:
O bowels of earth!
O boundless sky!
Will ye not hearken to my cry?

Above, the twinkling Milky Way;
The air cold,
Slanting moonlight,
The water-clock
sunk past midnight. My restless heart
grieves still;
I read once more this sad lament,
Before entrusting it to you,
My kindred soul and friend!

Dai-yu was deeply moved. 'She knew I'd be able to understand!' she thought to herself. 'That's why she wrote to me rather than anyone else.' She was lost in thought, when a voice called from outside:

'Is Cousin Lin at home?'

Refolding the letter, she replied in a somewhat distant tone:

'Who's that?'

Her visitors were already on their way into the room -Tan-chun, Shi Xiang-yun and the two Li sisters. The girls exchanged greetings, and Snowgoose served them with tea. During the conversation that followed, Dai-yu found her thoughts turning back to the gathering, two years earlier, at which they had written the chrysanthemum poems:

'Don't you think it's strange?' she remarked to the others. 'Since Cousin Chai moved out of the Garden, she's only been to see us a couple of times all together. And now it seems as though nothing will induce her to come. I'm beginning to wonder if she'll ever visit us again.

Tan-chun smiled.

'Of course she will! It's just that at the moment things are a bit difficult: Cousin Pan's wife is rather a tricky sort of person, Aunt Xue is getting on in years, and with this
latest trouble of Pan's on top of everything else, Chai really is needed to look after things at home. It's not like the old days, when she was free to do as she pleased.'

As she spoke, they heard a sudden gust of wind outside, and a patter of falling leaves against the paper-covered window. A faint scent drifted into the room. They all tried to guess what flower it could be coming from.

'It's very like cassia-blossom,' suggested Dai-yu.

Tan-chun laughed.

'Still a southerner at heart! It's the ninth month, long past cassia-time.'

Dai-yu smiled.

'You're right. But then I didn't say it *was*, only very *like...*'

'Anyway, Tan,' Xiang-yun butted in, 'you can't talk. Don't you know the lines:

> The lotus fragrance drifts for miles,
> The cassia blooms till autumn's end?

In the South, the late-flowering cassia is at its best now. It's just that you've never seen it. If you ever have a chance to go to the South, you'll be able to see it for yourself.'

'And what should I be doing in the South?' retorted Tan-chun with a crushing smile. 'Anyway, I knew all that *ages* ago, thanks very much...

The Li sisters grinned at each other.

'You never know, Tan,' said Dai-yu. 'We are "fairy earthlings, fleet of foot", that's what the old proverb says. Here today, who knows where tomorrow. Take me, for example. I was born a southerner, but here I am living in the North.'

Xiang-yun clapped her hands.

'Well said! Dai's got you there, Tan! And she's not the only one to have had such an experience. Look at the rest of us. Some of us are northerners, born and bred. Some were born in the South but grew up in

the North. And some grew up in the South and then moved here later. And yet here we all are together. It's our fate, you see. People and places have an affinity. Their karma brings them together.'

They all nodded at Xiang-yun's little discourse, except for Tan-chun who just smiled. After chatting for a while longer, they got up to go. Dai-yu walked with them as far as the door, and would have gone out, but they dissuaded her:

'You've only just started to feel better. If you come out now, you might catch a chill.'

So she stood in the doorway, said a few parting words, and watched the four of them walk out of the courtyard gate.

When they had gone, she went indoors again and sat down. The birds were returning to their nests; the sun was setting. With Xiang-yun's words about the South still ringing in her ears, Dai-yu drifted into a daydream. If her parents were still alive.. . If she still lived in the South, that gentle land of spring flowers and autumn moonlight, of limpid waters and luminous hills... How she would love to be there again, to visit the Twenty Four Bridges in Yangchow and all the famous historical sites of Nanking! In the South she would have plenty of servants of her own to wait on her. She could do and speak as she pleased, sail in painted pleasure-boats and ride in perfumed carriages, watch the fields of **red** apricot-blossom go by, spot the inn-signs through the trees.~.. She would be a young lady in her own right, not an outsider, dependent on others for everything. However much the Jias did for her, she always felt the need to be on her best behaviour. What wrong had she done in a previous incarnation to deserve this lonely existence? Those words written in captivity by the last emperor of Southern Tang -Here, all day long, I bathe my face in tears -how well they expressed her own feelings! Her soul seemed transported to some distant region.

When Nightingale came in, a single glance sufficed to
tell her the cause of Dai-yu's 'absence'. She had been in the room when Xiang-yun was talking, and knew how easily Dai-yu was upset by the slightest reference to the South.

'I thought you might feel tired again, Miss,' she said, 'after all your visitors and such a lot of talking, so I've just sent Snowgoose to the kitchen for a bowl of ham and cabbage broth, cooked with dried shrimps, dried seaweed and bamboo-shoots. Doesn't that sound good?'

'I suppose so.'

'And some congee?'

Dai-yu nodded.

'I'd rather you and Snowgoose made the congee yourselves. Don't have it done in the kitchen.'

'No Miss. You can never be sure how clean things are in the kitchen. We'll cook the congee ourselves. I asked Snowgoose to tell Cook Liu in the kitchen to take special care with the soup. Cook Liu said we were not to worry, she'd see to it personally and prepare it in her own room. Her daughter Fivey is going to keep an eye on it while it simmers.

'That's not what I meant,' replied Dai-yu. 'I wasn't complaining that the kitchen was dirty. It's just that I've been imposing on people for so long, and this illness of mine has caused quite enough extra trouble as it is. With all these special orders for soup and congee, I'm afraid I shall make myself unpopular.'

Her eyes were a tell-tale **red.**

'Oh Miss! You're imagining things!' protested Nightingale. 'You're Her Old Ladyship's own granddaughter, the apple of her eye. A chance to serve you is something people compete for, not grumble about.'

Dai-yu nodded thoughtfully.

'By the way,' she asked, 'is that Fivey you mentioned the one who used to be friendly with Parfumée when she was at Master Bao's place?'

'That's right.'

'Didn't I hear that she might be going into service at Master Bao's herself?'

'Yes, she was. Then she fell ill, and by the time she was better again and ready to start, there was all that trouble over Skybright, and it had to be put off.'

'I've always liked the look of her,' said Dai-yu.

Meanwhile a serving-woman had arrived with the soup, and Snowgoose went out to fetch it.

'Cook Liu says to tell Miss Lin this one's been specially cooked in her room by her Fivey,' said the old woman, 'so she won't need to fuss about its riot being clean.'

Snowgoose said she would relay this message and carried the soup into the room. Dai-yu, however, had already heard their conversation, and told Snowgoose to go back at once and ask the woman to thank Mrs Liu on her return. Snowgoose did this, and the old woman went on her way.

Snowgoose now laid out Dai-yu's bowl and chopsticks on the table.

'Would you like some of that dried turnip slaw we brought with us from the South, Miss, if I mix a

little sesame-oil and vinegar dressing with it?'

'If you like. But don't go to too much trouble.'

Snowgoose filled her bowl with congee. Dai-yu ate half and drank a couple of spoonfuls of the soup. She put down her spoon, and the two maids cleared away the things and cleaned the little table, which they then removed and replaced with the one that usually stood there. Dai-yu rinsed her mouth and washed her hands.

'Nightingale, have you put some incense on the brazier?'

'I was just going to, Miss.'

'You and Snowgoose have some of the soup and con-gee. They're good and wholesome. I'll see to the incense.'

The maids went into the outer room to eat. Dai-yu put some more incense on the brazier and sat down again. She was about to pick up a book to read when her attention
was caught by the melancholy soughing of the wind through the trees outside. A long sigh swept from one end of the Garden to the other. The metal wind-chimes started jangling under the eaves.

Snowgoose was the first to finish her soup, and came in to see if there was anything Dai-yu needed

'It's turning colder,' said Dai-yu. 'Have those fur clothes had a proper airing yet - the ones I asked you to take out the other day?'

'Yes, Miss.'

'Bring them here, will you? I'd like something warm to put over my shoulders.'

Snowgoose went out and returned with a bundle of fur-lined clothes, wrapped in a piece of felt. She undid the wrapper and held the clothes out for Dai-yu to choose from. Da.i-yu noticed among the clothes another smaller bundle wrapped in silk. She reached out a hand to pick it up, and untied the wrapper. Inside she found a pair of silk handkerchiefs. She recognized them at once as the ones Bao-yu had secretly sent her during his convalescence! There were the verses she had written on them! Even the tear-stains could still be seen! And next to them in the little bundle were the perfumed sachet she had embroidered for him (and half-demolished in a fit of pique), the torn fan-case, and the snipped remains of the silken cord she had made for his Magic Jade. Nightingale, in sorting out the clothes for airing, must have come across these mementos in one of the chests, and slipped them into this bundle for safety. Dai-yu seemed to have forgotten Snowgoose and the clothes entirely. She stood with the handkerchiefs in her hands and stared at them as though entranced. As she read the verses tears began to stream down her cheeks.

Nightingale came in, to find Snowgoose standing there dumbly, with the felt-wrapped bundle of clothes still held out in front of her, while spread on the little table at Daiyu's side were the sachet, fan-case and cord . Dai-yu was holding two faded handkerchiefs with some writing on them, and was gazing at them in tears. As the poet says:

Tokens of past estrangement
Catch the lover's eye;
Fresh tears fall
On tears of days gone by.

Nightingale knew only too well the tender memories attached to each one of those objects. She thought that sympathy would have little chance of success as a remedy, and decided instead to administer a cheerful rebuke.

'Come along now, Miss, what's the sense in looking at things like that? They belong to the past. You and Master Bao were children then. Goodness knows how many silly tiffs you had! All smiles one minute, crying your hearts out the next. Thank goodness you're both older and have learned to take life a bit more seriously. You wouldn't dream of spoiling pretty things like these *now* would you?'

She had meant well. But her words only reminded Daiyu of the old days with Bao-yu, and released a fresh flood of tears. Nightingale tried again to cheer her up:

'Come on now, Miss. Snowgoose is waiting. Please choose something to wear.'

Dai-yu let the handkerchiefs drop. Nightingale swiftly retrieved them, wrapped them up again with the sachet and the other things, and put them away.

Finally Dai-yu draped one of the fur-lined jackets over her shoulders and walked listlessly to the outer-room. She sat down, and looking round saw Bao-chai's poem and letter still lying on the table. She picked them up and reread them a couple of times.

'The *feeling's* the same,' she said to herself with a sigh, 'even if our circumstances are different. I should write something in reply. I'll write four stanzas and set them to an air for the Qin. Then tomorrow I

can make a copy and send it to Chai.'

She told Snowgoose to bring in her brush and inkstone, which were on the table outside, and moistening the ink, began to write. When she had completed four stanzas, she took a Qin Handbook from her shelf and looked through it. She decided to make a suite out of the two old melodies, *Lonely Orchid Pavan* and *faintly Virtue.* Having done the pointing, she wrote out a copy of the words there and then to send to Bao-chai, and asked Snowgoose to fetch the three-quarter size Qin she had brought from home, which was stored in a trunk. She tuned the strings and did a few preliminary finger-exercises. Her natural aptitude compensated for her lack of practice, and it was not long before all that she had learnt as a child came back to her. After playing for a while, seeing that it was already late in the night, she told Snowgoose to put away the Qin, and went to bed. And so we must leave her.

One day Bao-yu, after completing his toilet, set off as usual with Tealeaf to go to school. On their way they encountered Inky, another of his page-boys, who came bounding up to them with a broad grin on his face and announced:

'Good news, Master Bao! The Preceptor's not at school today, and you've all been given the day off!'

'Are you being serious?' asked Bao-yu.

'If you don't believe me, take a look: isn't that Master Huan and Young Master Lan on their way back now?'

Bao-yu looked and sure enough there were his half-brother and young nephew coming towards him with their contingent of pages, chatting away and giggling, though he could not catch what it was they were saying. When they saw him, they halted and stood with their arms respectfully at their sides.

'Why have you come back from school so soon?' Bao-yu asked them.

'The Preceptor is busy today,' replied Huan, 'and says we can all have the day off. We're to attend as usual tomorrow.'

Hearing this, Bao-yu turned about and, having reported the news to Grandmother Jia and his father, returned to **Green** Delights.

Why are you back?' asked Aroma.

He told her what had happened, and after sitting with her for a minute or two made a move to go out again.

'Where are you off to in such a hurry?' she asked. 'If you've been given the day off school, that doesn't mean you have to go charging about. You ought to make it a day of rest.'

Bao-yu stopped in his tracks and hung his head.

'I know you're right. But when will I next have a chance to get out and have some fun? Be a sport...

He said this in such an appealing tone of voice that Aroma relented.

'All right,' she said with a smile.

Meanwhile lunch had been brought in, and he had to stay and eat it. He bolted it down, rinsed his mouth and was off. Fast as a puff of smoke he sped to the Naiad's House. He found Nightingale in the courtyard hanging handkerchiefs out to dry.

'Has Miss Lin had her lunch yet?' he asked.

'She had half a bowl of congee earlier on,' replied Nightingale, 'but wasn't feeling very hungry. She's sleeping at the moment. You'd better go somewhere else just now, Master Bao, and come back a bit later.'

He left reluctantly, not knowing quite where to go. Suddenly it occurred to him that he had not seen Xi-chun for several days, and he began strolling in the direction of Smartweed Loggia. When he reached the courtyard and stood by one of the windows, it all seemed very quiet and deserted. She too, he concluded, was having her nap and not to be disturbed. He was about to leave when he heard a faint sound coming from inside, too faint to identify. He stood still and listened again, in the hope of hearing it more clearly. There it was! A distinct little tap! He was still trying to think what it could be, when a voice said:
'Why have you made that move, and not countered there?'
It was a game of Go! But Bao-yu did not have time to recognize the voice of the speaker. He heard Xi-chun reply:
'Why should I bother? If you take me there, I shall simply counter here, and if you take me again I shall take you again. I shall still be one move ahead, and in the end I shall be able to connect.'
'And what if I take you here?'
'Aiyo!' exclaimed Xi-chun. 'You had an inside counterattack up your sleeve. I'm defenceless.'
That other girl's voice was so familiar! But he still couldn't quite place it. It wasn't one of his cousins, he was sure of that. And yet Xi-chun was unlikely to be entertaining an outsider. Lifting the door-curtain very

gently aside, he peeped in. The Go-partner was none other than the nun from **Green** Bower Hermitage, the Dweller Beyond The Threshold, Adamantina. He dared not intrude any further. The girls were totally absorbed in their game, and had neither of them noticed that they were being spied upon. Bao-yu continued to stand there and watch. Adamantina leant low over the board and said to Xi-chun:
'Do you *want* to lose that whole corner?'
'Of course not! It's perfectly safe. All those pieces of yours are "dead"., aren't they?'
'Are you sure? Go ahead and try.'
'All right. There's my move. Now let's see what you can do.'
A smile crossed Adamantina's face. She placed her next piece to link up with one she already had on the edge of the board, and then pounced on one of Xi-chun's pieces and annihilated her entire corner. She laughed:
'That's called "Pulling Your Boots Off Upside Down"!'
Before Xi-chun had time to reply, their unobserved observer, unable to contain himself any longer, burst out laughing. The two girls were startled out of their wits.
'What do you mean by sneaking in here without saying a word?' exclaimed Xi-chun. 'What an ill-mannered way to behave, honestly! How long have you been there?'
'I came in just as you started to play for that corner. I had to watch it out.'
He bowed to Adamantina.
'Greetings, Reverend Sister!' he said with a smile. 'Wherefore this rare excursion from the mystic portals of Zen? What karma brings thee to Maya's dusty realm?'
She blushed from ear to ear, said nothing, lowered her head and stared at the Go-board. Bao-yu could see that he had embarrassed her, and tried to make up for it.
'Seriously,' he said, with a charming smile, 'how can common mortals compare with those who, like you, have renounced the world? In the first place, you have achieved inner peace. And with that peace comes a deep spirituality. And with that spirituality a clear insight
As he was speaking, Adamantina lifted her eyes a fraction and glanced at him. She looked down again at once, and a deep flush spread slowly across her face. Bao-yu realized that she was deliberately trying to ignore him, and sat down awkwardly beside the table. Xi-chun wanted to continue the game, but after a silence Adamantina said:
'Let's play another day.'
Having said this, she stood up, straightened out her dress and sat down again. Then, turning to Bao-yu, she asked, in a zany tone of voice:
'Where have you come from?'
It came as a great relief to Bao-yu that she should speak to him at all, and he was grateful of the chance to remedy his earlier blunder. But then it suddenly struck him that her question might not be as straightforward as it sounded. Was this one of her Zen subtleties? He sat there tongue-tied and **red** in the face. Adamantina smiled and turned to talk to Xi-chun. Xi-chun smiled too.

'Cousin Bao,' she said, 'what's so hard about that? Haven't you heard the saying "I come from whence I come"? To judge by the colour of your face anyone would think you were among strangers. Don't be shy!'

Adamantina seemed to take this banter personally. She experienced a strange stirring of emotion, and her face grew hot. She knew she must be blushing again, and became extremely flustered. Rising to her feet, she said:

'I've been here a long time. I think I should be making my way back to the Hermitage.'

Xi-chun knew the peculiarity of Adamantina's temperament and did not press her to stay. She was showing her out, when Adamantina gave a little laugh and said:

'It's so long since I've been to see you, and the way home is so full of twists and turns. I'm afraid of losing my way.

'Pray allow me to be your guide!' volunteered Bao-yu promptly.

'I would be greatly honoured,' she replied. 'Please go ahead, Master Bao.'

The two of them said goodbye to Xi-chun and walked out of Smartweed Loggia. Their winding path led them near the Naiad's House, and as they approached they heard strains of music in the air.

'That's a Qin,' said Adamantina. 'Where could it be coming from, I wonder?'

'It must be Cousin Lin playing in her room,' replied Bao-yu.

'Really? Is that another of her accomplishments? I've never heard her mention it.

Bao-yu repeated what Dai-yu had told him. 'Shall we go and watch?' he suggested. 'You mean listen, I suppose?' said Adamantina. 'One listens to the Qin. One never watches.'

‘There you are!’ said Bao-yu with a grin. ‘I said I was a common sort of mortal.’
They had now reached a rockery close to the Naiad’s House. They sat down and listened in silence, touched by the poignancy of the melody. Then a murmuring voice began to chant:

‘Autumn deepens, and with it
the wind’s bitter moan.
My love is far away; I mourn alone.
Gazing in vain
For a glimpse of home,
I stand at my balcony.
Tears bedew my gown.

After a brief pause, the chant began again:

‘Hills and lakes melt into distant night.
Through my casement shines the clear light
Of the moon
And the sleepless Milky Way.
My thin robe trembles
As wind and dew alight.’

There was another brief pause. Adamantina said to Baoyu:
‘The first stanza rhymed on "moan", the second on "night". I wonder how the next will rhyme?’
The chant began again from within:

‘Fate denies you freedom,
holds you bound;
Inflicting on me too
a heavy wound.
In closest harmony
Our hearts resound;
In contemplation of the Ancients
Is solace to be found.’

‘That must be the end of the third stanza,’ said Adamantina. ‘How tragic it is!’
‘I don’t know anything about music,’ said Bao-yu. ‘But just from the way she sang, I found it terribly sad.’
There was another pause, and they heard Dai-yu tuning her Qin.
‘That tonic B-flat of hers is too sharp for the scale,’ commented Adamantina.
The chanting began again:

‘Alas! this particle of dust, the human soul,
Is only playing out
a predetermined role.
Why grieve to watch
The Wheel of Karma turn?
A moonlike purity remains
My constant goal.’

As she listened, Adamantina turned pale with horror.
‘Just listen to the way she suddenly uses a sharpened fourth there! Her intonation is enough to shatter bronze and stone! It’s much too sharp!’
‘What do you mean, too sharp?’ asked Bao-yu.
‘It will never take the strain.’
As they were talking, they heard a sudden twang and the tonic string snapped. Adamantina stood up at once and began to walk away.
‘What’s the matter?’ asked Bao-vu.

‘You will find out in time. Please don’t say anything about this.’
She walked off, leaving Bao-yu in a state of great confusion. Eventually he too made his way dejectedly home. And there our narrative leaves him.

Adamantina arrived back at **Green** Bower Hermitage to find the old lay-sisters waiting for her return. They closed the gate after her and she sat with them for a while, intoning her Zen breviary. They had dinner, and after dinner the incense braziers were replenished. They all bowed before the shrine of the Bodhisattva and the women went off duty, leaving Adamantina alone. Her couch and back-rest were set out for her. Sitting cross-legged, she first regulated her breathing and closed her eyes. Then, cleansed of all wayward thoughts, her mind began to soar towards the realm of higher truth. She sat in meditation until well after midnight, when she was disturbed by a sudden clattering sound on the roof. Afraid there might be burglars about, she rose from her couch and went into the front hall. Looking out, all she could see were long clouds that stretched across the sky, and the moon shining through a watery haze. It was a mild night, and she stayed there for a while, leaning over the balustrade.
Suddenly two cats started wailing to each other on the roof above her head. The words Bao-yu had spoken to her that afternoon came flashing into her mind. She felt an involuntary racing of the heart, her ears burned. Making a determined effort to compose herself, she went back into her meditation room and sat down again on her couch. Her efforts were in vain. Something was overpowering her. She felt ten thousand horses stampeding through her head. The couch itself seemed to start swaying, and her body seemed to leave the Hermitage. She was surrounded by handsome young noblemen, all asking for her hand in marriage. There were matchmakers hustling her towards a bridal carriage against her will. Then the scene changed again. Now she was being kidnapped. A gang of ruffians with swords and clubs was threatening her, mauling her. She started screaming for help.
By now the old nuns and lay-sisters were wide awake, and had come hurrying into the hall with candles to discover the cause of the disturbance. They found her lying on the ground, with her arms outstretched, frothing at the mouth. She was woken from this apparent coma, only to fix her eyes into a rigid stare and cry out, her cheeks burning a fierce crimson:
‘Buddha is my Protector! Don’t touch me, you ruffians!’
The women were too scared to do anything but call out:
‘Wake up! Wake up! We’re here now!’
‘I want to go home!’ replied Adamantina. ‘Who’ll be my friend and take me home?’
~But this *is* your home!’
While the others stayed talking to her, one of the nuns was sent to pray at the shrine of the Goddess of Mercy. She shook the bamboo-box of tallies kept by the altar, and on consulting the relevant passage in the divination-book read that the Yin spirit of the south-west corner had been offended.
‘Of course!’ exclaimed one of the others, when she reported back. ‘The south-west corner of the Garden was originally uninhabited, so it would be sure to contain a high concentration of Yin essence.’
Some busied themselves making soup, others brought water. One of the nuns, who had come with Adaniantina from the South and was for that reason closer and more devoted to her than the others, sat next to her on the couch and put her arms protectively round her. Adamantina turned her head:
‘Who’s that?’
‘It’s only me.’
Adamantina looked at her curiously for a minute.
‘Oh it really *is!’* she cried, and flung her arms round the nun, sobbing hysterically. ‘Oh Mother, save me, or I’m going to die!’
The nun called out to her in an attempt to bring her to her senses, and began to massage her gently. The old women brought in tea, and they sat up together till dawn when finally Adamantina dozed off. The nun sent for the doctor, and several doctors came and took her pulses. There were as many differing diagnoses as there were doctors. Excessive worry damaging the spleen; phlogistic intrusion into the haematic system; offence caused to an evil spirit; a combination of internal and external chill. None of these seemed conclusive. Finally a doctor came whose first question after reading her pulses was:
‘Did the young lady practise meditation?’
The women informed him that it was a regular thing with her.
‘And did this illness develop quite suddenly last night?’
‘Yes, it did.’

'Indubitably a case of heat in the cardiac orb affording
entrance to a vagrant evil spirit.'
'Will she be all right?'
Luckily the meditation does not seem to have been too far advanced and the spirit was therefore not able to penetrate too deeply. She will most probably recover.'
He wrote out a prescription for the Dephlogistication of the Cardiac Orb, after one dose of which Adamantina began to show signs of improvement.
News of her attack soon spread, and it became a sublect of gossip for the lads in town. 'All that chastity and religion was bound to be too much for a girl of her age. Especially such an attractive, lively thing... Sooner or later she'll get soft on some lucky fellow and run away.
A few days later Adamantina was slightly better. But her concentration seemed to have gone and she often found herself drifting off into a dreamlike state.
The news did not reach Xi-chun for a few days. She was sitting in her room when Landscape came hurrying in.
'Miss, have you heard what's happened to Sister Adamantina?'
'No - what is it?'
'I heard Miss Xing and Mrs Zhu talking about it yesterday. Remember that day she was here playing Go? Apparently that very night she had a fit. She was talking about bandits trying to carry her away and all sorts of other strange things. She still hasn't quite recovered. Don't you think it's peculiar?'
Xi-chun thought silently to herself:
'So for all her fastidious purity, Addie's worldly karma is still not complete. If only I had been born into a different family! If only I were free to become a nun! I would never be tempted by evil spirits. I know I would be able to subdue every unholy thought and achieve total detachment from the world and all its entanglements.'
With this thought she experienced a sudden sense of illumination, which she tried to express in the following gãtha:

Since at first there was no space,
Things can have no proper place.
From Void all comes;
To Void must all return.

She told a maid to light some incense, and meditated for a while. Then she took down her Go Handbook and began looking through it, studying the tactics 6f such famous Go Masters of old as Kong Rong and Wang Ji-xin. There was 'Crab Wrapped in Lotus Leaves', and 'Golden Oriole Strikes Hare'; but she found neither of these very impressive, and 'Corner Kill in Thirty Six Moves' she found too hard to understand and harder still to remember. It was Dragon-chain of Ten Galloping Horses' that really caught her fancy. She was still working it out, when she heard someone come into the courtyard and call out:
'Landscape!'
But to know who this visitor was, you must turn to the next chapter.

CHAP

CHAPTER 88

Bao-yu gratifies his grandmother
by praising a fatherless child
Cousin Zhen rectifies family discipline
by chastising two unruly servants

Xi-chun was puzzling over her Go Handbook when she heard someone calling outside:
'Landscape!'
She recognized the voice as Faithful's. Landscape went out into the courtyard, and reappeared with Faithful, followed by a younger maid carrying a small parcel wrapped in **yellow** silk.
'What's that?' asked Xi-chun, her curiosity aroused. Faithful explained.

‘Next year is Her Old Ladyship’s eighty-first birthday, and since eighty-one is nine times nine, she has pledged herself to hold a nine-day mass, and to have three thousand six hundred and fifty-one copies made of the *Sutra of the Immaculate Diamond*. That has all been handed out to copyists. But there is a popular saying: "If the *Diamond Sutra* is the outer shell of the magic, its core is the *Sutra of the Heart of Wisdom."* In other words, to enhance one’s merit, one should slip in a *Heart Sutra* too. So now Her Old Ladyship wants copies of that as well, and because of its greater importance as scripture and its connection with Our Lady of Mercy, she wants three hundred and sixty-five copies to be done by the young ladies and young mistresses of the family. Apart from Mrs Lian, who’s too busy running the household, and can’t write anyway, all the ladies that can write at all are being given a share in this act of piety and devotion, even Mrs Zhen and Mr Zhen’s other ladies in the Eastern Mansion. Of course, everyone in the inner family will be expected to take part.’

Xi-chun nodded.

‘Sutra-copying is one thing I can do with conviction. Leave it there, will you? Would you like some tea?’

Faithful deposited the little package on the table, and sat down with Xi-chun, while Landscape poured her a cup of tea.

‘Will you be doing some copying too?’ asked Xi-chun with a smile.

‘Don’t tease, Miss!’ answered Faithful. ‘Three or four years ago I might have, perhaps. But I’m so out of practice now. When did you last see me with a brush in my hand?’

‘But think of the merit you’d acquire.’

‘I’ve already seen to that,’ replied Faithful. ‘Every day, after settling Her Old Ladyship down to sleep, I’ve been saying Lord Buddha’s name and counting my "Buddha Rice". I’ve been collecting the rice-grains for more than three years and putting them by for just such an occasion as this, to dedicate them to Buddha and add my contribution, my little act of charity and devotion, to Her Old Ladyship’s.’

‘It sounds as if when Lady Jia becomes Our Lady of Mercy,’ said Xi-chun, ‘you’ll have to be her inseparable companion, the Dragon King’s daughter!’

‘Oh no, Miss!’ protested Faithful. ‘That’s too grand for me. It is true though, I could never serve anyone but Her Old Ladyship. I must be bound to her by some karma from a past life.’

With these words Faithful rose to leave, bidding the younger maid untie the little parcel, and exhibiting its contents to Xi-chun.

‘This roll of plain paper is to be used for the sutra. And while you write,’ she went on, handing her a bundle of Tibetan incense-sticks, ‘you are to light one of these.’

Xi-chun nodded, and Faithful returned with the other maid to Grandmother Jia’s apartment, where she reported on her errand and stood watching the game of backgammon that was in progress between the old lady and Li Wan. Li Wan with her next throw removed several of Grandmother Jia’s pins to the bar, and Faithful had difficulty in keeping. a straight face.

They were presently distracted from their game by the arrival of Bao-yu, carrying in each hand a little bamboo-splint cage containing crickets.

‘I heard you weren’t sleeping very well, Grannie,’ he said, ‘so I brought you these to help you relax.’

Grandmother Jia laughed.

‘You naughty boy! Just because your father’s not at home...’

When he protested his innocence, Grandmother J ia asked:

‘Why aren’t you at school then? What are you up to with those things anyway?’

‘They weren’t my idea, Grannie,’ explained Bao-yu. ‘What happened was that a day or two ago Huan and Lan each had a couplet to complete in class, and as Huan got stuck, I whispered something to help him out. When he recited it, the Preceptor was impressed and praised him highly for it. Huan bought me the crickets as a thank-you present. I should like to give them to you.’

‘Hasn’t that boy been doing any work, for heaven’s sake!’ exclaimed Grandmother Jia. ‘Surely he can manage a couplet on his own? If not, then he deserves a good spanking from the Preceptor. It might teach him a thing or two. As for you, have you forgotten the state you got into when your father was at home and asked you for a few lines of verse? Don’t you go getting too full of yourself now. What a little rascal that Huan is! To go begging for help, and then look around for a nice present to butter you up with! He certainly seems precocious enough when it comes to cheating - he should be ashamed of himself! Heaven alone knows how he’ll turn out when he grows up...’

A ripple of laughter spread through the room.

‘But tell me about young Lan,’ went on Grandmother Jia. ‘How did he manage? As the youngest, strictly speaking he should have been helped by~.....’

Bao-yu detected the note of sarcasm in her voice and laughed.

‘Oh no! He didn’t need any help. He could manage on his own.’
‘I don’t believe you!’ said Grandmother Jia. ‘It was you at your tricks again, I’ll be bound. Hark at you! A camel among sheep! Just because you re so grown-up now, and so good at your compositions...’
Bao-yu smiled.
‘No, seriously, Lan managed perfectly well on his own. The Preceptor was very pleased and said he had a brilliant future ahead of him. If you don’t believe me, Grannie, send for him and test him yourself.’
‘If that *is* the truth,’ said Grandmother Jia, ‘then I am overjoyed to hear it.. But I have a feeling that you are making it all up. If he really can do such things at his age, he may well distinguish himself when he grows up.
She looked at Li Wan, and thought of Lan’s father Jia Zhu.
‘What a consolation that would be for your elder brother’s death,’ she went on, addressing Bao-yu again. ‘And what a well-earned reward for all his mother’s efforts in bringing him up! In time he will be a pillar of support to the family, as his father would have been!’
The thought brought tears to her eyes. Li Wan was also moved, but seeing the old lady becoming somewhat emotional, she checked her own tears and said with a brave smile:
‘Whatever good fortune we may enjoy, Grannie, we owe it all to you. I only pray that Lan will live up to your expectations and bring fortune to the whole family. His progress should be a source of joy. Please don’t go upsetting yourself.’

She turned to Bao-yu.

‘And please don’t you go giving him exaggerated ideas of his achievements, Bao. He is only a child, remember. He may take you seriously and not realize that you are only trying to encourage him; and then he will become proud and conceited and *never* do well.’

‘Well said, my dear,’ commented Grandmother Jia. ‘But remember too that he is still very young and should not be driven too hard. Children only have a certain amount of strength. Push them too soon and you can ruin them. Then they may never be able to study properly, and all your efforts will have been in vain.

Li Wan could contain herself no longer and burst into floods of tears. As she was hurriedly drying her eyes, Jia Huan and Jia Lan came into the room to pay their evening respects to Grandmother Jia. Lan then greeted his mother and returned to stand respectfully at his great-grandmother’s side.

‘I have just been hearing from your uncle Bao,’ said Grandmother Jia, ‘how well you did with your couplet, and what praises you won from the Preceptor.’

Lan smiled modestly. Faithful now came over to say that dinner was ready.

‘I want to invite Mrs Xue,’ said Grandmother Jia, and Amber promptly sent a maid over to Lady Wang’s apartment. Bao-yu and Jia Huan withdrew from the room, while Li Wan’s maid Candida and the younger maids came forward to clear away the backgammon pieces. Li Wan stayed to wait on Grandmother Jia, and Jia Lan stood at his mother’s side.

‘The two of you can stay to dinner with me,’ said Grandmother Jia.

‘Yes Grandmother,’ replied Li Wan. A minute or two later dinner was brought in, and the maid returned from Lady Wang’s apartment with the following message:

‘Her Ladyship says that Mrs Xue will not be able to come. She was only over on a short visit and went home after lunch.’

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Grandmother Jia told Jia Lan to occupy the seat next to her. Our narrative omits any further details of that evening’s meal. After dinner, when she had washed her hands and rinsed her mouth, Grandmother Jia reclined on her couch and chatted idly with her granddaughter-in-law and great-grandson. A junior maid came in and asked Amber to say that Mr Zhen (who, in the temporary absence of Jia Zheng and Jia Lian, had that day been supervising business at Rong-guo House) was waiting outside to pay his evening respects.
‘Tell him that I have been informed,’ said Grandmother Jia, ‘but that he need not bother to come in. He can go home and rest. He must be tired after the day’s work.’
The maid relayed this to the old women outside, Cousin Zhen was informed, an4 returned to Ning-guo House.

The following day he came over again to Rong-guo House, to see to the day's business. After the pages on the gate had produced a series of miscellaneous matters for his attention, it was reported by another page that the farm-bailiff had arrived with the seasonal produce. Cousin Zhen asked to see the inventory, which was presented to him by the page, and he proceeded to read through the various items, mostly fresh fruit, with some game and vegetables.
'Who usually looks after this department?' asked Cousin Zhen.
'Zhou Rui, sir.'
Zhou Rui was summoned and Cousin Zhen instructed him:
'Check through all the items on this list and have them delivered. Have a copy made for my reference. And tell the kitchen to cook some extra dishes when they are preparing lunch for the servants. The bailiff is to have something to eat before he goes, and the usual tip.'
'Yes sir.'
Zhou Rui told the servants to carry the goods into Xi-feng's courtyard, and gave instructions for them to be checked against the inventory. Then he went off, only to reappear shortly afterwards before Cousin Zhen:
'Excuse me sir, have you checked the entries yet?'
'Do you think I have time to do that?' replied Cousin Zhen impatiently. 'I have given you the list and leave the matter entirely in your hands.'
'I have checked all the items through to the best of my ability sir, and everything seems in order. But perhaps you would like to send for the bailiff, as you have a copy yourself, to make sure the list is genuine.
'What a lot of fuss over a bit of fruit!' exclaimed Cousin Zhen. 'It's really not that important. I take your word for it.
At this moment Bao Er came into the room and kotowed to Cousin Zhen. (This Bao Er, it may be remembered, was the servant who had in the past been useful to both Cousin Zhen and Jia Lian. On this occasion he had come over for the day to assist Cousin Zhen.)
'I beg to be released, sir,' he said, 'and put back on external duties.'
'What is the meaning of this?' asked Cousin Zhen, addressing Bao Er and Zhou Rui simultaneously.
'What's the point of my being here if no one listens to my opinion?' replied Bao Er.
'Who asked for your opinion?' said Cousin Zhen brusquely.
'I'm tired of spying for other people!' muttered Bao Er to himself.
'Sir,' put in Zhou Rui promptly, 'I have been in charge of farm rents and income here for years, and on average I should say around four hundred thousand taels' worth passes through my hands each year, and I have never had a word of complaint from the Master or their Ladyships or the young mistresses about anything, let alone such a small matter as this. According to him, we are supposed to have made off with the family's entire property and estates!'
'It looks as if Bao Er has started some sort of quarrel,' thought Cousin Zhen to himself. 'Better get rid of him.'
'Out of my sight!' he barked. Then turning from Bao Er to Zhou Rui:
'That is all. Carry on with your work.'
The two servants left.
Not long afterwards Cousin Zhen was resting in the study when he heard the most terrific din break out in the direction of the main gate. He sent a servant to inquire, who came back to report that a fight had started between Bao Er and an adopted son of Zhou Rui's.
'Who is this adopted son?' asked Cousin Zhen.
'He San is his name, sir,' replied the servant. 'A worthless fellow who spends most of his time drinking and causing trouble. He sometimes comes round here and hangs about in the porter's lodge. Apparently he got involved in the argument between Bao Er and Zhou Rui.'
'This is the limit!' exclaimed Cousin Zhen. 'Have Bao Er and this He San character bound immediately! What about Zhou Rui?'
'He disappeared when the fighting started, sir.
'Find him at once! This is preposterous!'
'Yes, sir!'
In the midst of this commotion, Jia Lian returned and Cousin Zhen told him what had happened in his absence.
'What next!' cried Lian. He sent an extra servant to help apprehend Zhou Rui, who soon realized that escape was impossible, gave himself up and was led before the masters.
'Tie him up as well!' ordered Cousin Zhen, and Jia Lian added, addressing himself principally to Zhou Rui:

‘Mr Zhen settled your petty differences once and for all. Why go out and start fighting all over again? And as if that wasn’t bad enough, you have to drag in this brat of yours, He San! And when you should have been bringing them to heel, you disappear and leave them to it!’
He dealt Zhou Rui a few hefty kicks.
‘It’s no good punishing only him,’ said Cousin Zhen grimly, and ordered his men to give Bao Er and He San fifty lashes each and send them packing. This done, he and Jia Lian sat down to discuss family business.
In the servants’ quarters this incident became the subject of many a private exchange of opinions. Some saw it as an attempt on Cousin Zhen’s part to cover up for incompetence; others said he was just inept at handling people; while others saw it as yet another instance of his unpleasant character. ‘Wasn’t it he who recommended Bao Er to Mr Lian in that sordid business with the You sisters? What’s probably happened is that Bao Er’s wife won’t oblige Mr Zhen as she did Mr Lian, so now he’s taken it out on the husband...’ There were many differing interpretations.

Meanwhile the Jia clan lost no time in turning Jia Zheng’s promotion at the Ministry of Works to their financial advantage. Jia Yun was certainly not going to be left out, but went around promising work to contractors (and negotiating percentages for himself), and having bought a quantity of fashionable embroideries, made his way to the apartment of his erstwhile patroness.
Xi-feng, who had just learnt from one of her maids that ‘Mr Zhen and Mr Lian were in a temper and beating the servants’, was on the point of sending someone to discover the details when she saw Jia Lian himself walk in, and was able to hear the full story from him.

‘It may all have been over a trifle,’ she commented, ‘but we must put a stop to such behaviour at all costs’. If they think they can get away with it now, when the family fortunes are supposed to be flourishing, what is going to happen when the younger generation takes over? They’ll have a mutiny on their hands. I remember a year or so ago witnessing the most appalling scene at Ning-guo House - Big Jiao sprawled all over the steps, blind drunk and swearing sixteen to the dozen. None of us was spared. I don’t care if he has rendered distinguished services in the past. Servants should know their place, and show a proper sense of respect. The trouble with Cousin Zhen’s wife - please don’t misunderstand me - is that she is much too unsuspecting and lets her staff get away with anything. This Bao Er of theirs - or whatever his name is - is typical. Come to think of it, hasn’t he been rather useful to you and Zhen in the past? Aren’t you being a bit ungrateful to start flogging him now?:
Stung to the quick, Jia Lian sheepishly tried to change the subject. Presently he remembered a pressing engagement and left.
Crimson now came in to report the arrival of Jia Yun.
‘I wonder what he’s after this time?’ mused Xi-feng to herself. Then aloud to Crimson:
‘You’d better show him in.’
Crimson went out. She looked Jia Yun in the face and gave him a cheeky smile. He (swift on the uptake as ever) advanced towards her and said:
‘Did you tell Mrs Lian that I was here, Miss Crimson?’
She blushed.’
‘I suppose you have a lot of important business, Mr Yun...’
‘On the contrary, I only wish I had had cause to come here and trouble you more often, Miss Crimson... I remember last year when you were employed at Uncle Bao’s…’
He was about to say more but Crimson, who was afraid someone might interrupt them, asked in haste:
‘Did you ever get my handkerchief?’
Her words provoked Jia Yun to such a pitch of excitement that he was ready to burst. But before he could say a word a maid came out from Xi-feng’s room, and he and **Crimson** were obliged to go in together at once. They walked side by side, close enough for him to whisper:
‘When I leave, be sure to see me out. I’ve something to tell you that might amuse you...
She blushed fiercely and flashed her eyes at him without a word. Going ahead to inform Xi-feng of his approach, she returned to usher him in, lifting the door-curtain and beckoning to him, while announcing in her most formal tone of voice:
‘Madam will be pleased to see you now, sir.’
With a smile Jia Yun advanced with her into the room and greeted Xi-feng. He conveyed his mother’s regards, which Xi-feng returned politely before asking:
‘And what brings you here today?’
Jia Yun embarked upon his speech:

Auntie's great kindness to me in the past has been ever present in my mind and a source of endless gratification. I have been awaiting an opportunity to present a token of my esteem and have only held back for fear that you might consider such a gesture inappropriate. The forthcoming Double Ninth Festival finally seemed sufficient justification for my purchasing a little something which, though I know you have more than enough of everything here already, I humbly pray you to do me the honour of accepting as an earnest of my humble devotion.'
Xi-feng laughed.
'Come on. Cut the cackle. What's it all about? Sit down and tell me.'
Jia Yun took a perch and deposited his offering gingerly with both hands on the surface of an adjacent table.
'I know you're pretty hard up,' Xi-feng went on, 'so why go spending money like this? I have no need of such things and don't expect them. Come on now, tell me what you have really come for.'
'Truly for no other reason than my deep and hitherto unexpressed sense of gratitude...
There was however by now a trace of a smile.
'Come off it,' said Xi-feng. 'I am perfectly familiar with the state of your finances. Don't expect me to go taking things from you for nothing. If you want me to accept your present then tell me the truth. If you carry on beating about the bush like this, I shall certainly not accept anything from you.'
Jia Yun was forced to come to the point. He rose to his feet and donned his most obsequious smile.
'I did entertain one modest and I trust not altogether unreasonable hope. It reached my ears a few days ago that Sir Zheng had been given the overall supervision of mausoleum construction at the Ministry, and as I have one or two friends with considerable experience in that line -extremely competent people, I might add - I would just like to ask if it would be at all possible for you to put in a word for them with Sir Zheng. If a job or two were to come their way I should be indebted to you for eternity. And need I add that my own services are always at your disposal should anything materialize in the way of work here at the mansion.
'In most matters I know I have a certain amount of influence,' replied Xi-feng. 'But when it comes to this sort of thing, the major contracts are completely in the pockets of the President and other senior officials, while the smaller jobs are handed out by the clerks and runners. No one else gets so much as a look in, I'm afraid. Our own people can only work for Sir Zheng as his personal staff. Even your uncle Lian only goes in when there's something directly connected with the family. He has nothing to do with official business. At home, as soon as things are patched up in one place they break out in another - even Mr Zhen can't keep order properly. A junior like you would never be able to cope. No, I'm afraid whatever jobs there might have been at the Ministry have nearly all gone. People are desperate for work. Surely there's something you can turn your hand to at home, to keep body and soul together? I'm being serious. Go home and think it over. As for your gratitude, consider it expressed. And take these things back to wherever they came from.'
While she was speaking, a group of nannies had come into the room with little Qiao-jie, dressed in a colourfully embroidered smock and clutching an armful of toys. She went running over to her mother, laughing and prattling away, and J ia Yun stood up once more and swiftly transferred his attentions and unctuous smiles from Xi-feng to her daughter.
'So this is my respected cousin? Now is there any little present you would like me to get you, dearie?'
A loud *Waaah!* burst from Qiao-jie's lips and Jia Yun retreated hastily.
'There, there, my darling! Come here!' Xi-feng held the child closely to her. 'This is your cousin Yun. Don't be shy.'
Jia Yun tried again.
'What a sweet little girl! Such a pretty face promises a lifetime of happiness.'
Qiao-jie turned her little head to take another peep at him and immediately burst out crying again. Jia Yun sensed that he was no longer welcome and rose to leave.
'Don't forget your things,' insisted Xi-feng.
'Oh please, Aunt Feng! Do me this one favour...
'If you don't take them yourself, I shall send someone after you with them. Honestly Yun, this is not the way to go about things. You are not a stranger here. If something crops up I will certainly let you know. Until then there i:
nothing I can do, and there is nothing to be gained by wasting your time and money like this.'
Jia Yun could see that she was not going to relent. His face flushed as he took his leave.
'I shall nevertheless continue to search for an acceptable present.'
'Crimson, carry these things to the hall for Mr Yun,' said Xi-feng curtly, 'and see him out.'
'People are right,' thought Yun to himself on his way out. 'She's a real tyrant! Won't budge an inch! Hard

as nails! Serves her right if she can't produce an heir. That little girl of hers gave me a queer feeling too... She seemed to take against me, almost as if we had some feud from a past life. What damnable luck! All that work for nothing!'
His rebuff came as a disappointment to **Crimson** too,
who picked up the parcel and followed him out. He took it from her and, when no one was looking, undid the wrapping, took out a couple of pieces of embroidery and gave them to her. At first she would not accept them and protested under her breath:
'You shouldn't, Mr Yun. Think how dreadful it would look for both of us if Mrs Lian found out.'
'Don't be silly. Keep them. She'll never know. If you don't, I'll take it as a personal insult.'
Crimson smiled vainly and took them from him.
'If you insist. But I don't want them. I really don't know *what* to think...
Her face was burning again. Jia Yun laughed, and said:
'It's the thought that counts...
By now they had reached the inner gate and Jia Yun concealed the remaining gifts inside his gown while **Crimson** urged him on his way.
'You must go now,' she said. 'If ever you want anything here, contact me. Now that I'm in service with Mrs Lian, you can approach me directly.'
Yun shook his head bitterly.
'She's too much of a tyrant. I shan't be coming back in a hurry. Don't forget what I said just now though. If I do have a chance to see you again, I've more to tell you.'
Crimson blushed from ear to ear.
'You'd really better go now. Come again as often as you like. If you've become distant from Mrs Lian, you've only yourself to blame.
'All right, I understand.'
Jia Yun went on his way and **Crimson** stood in the gateway, - following him into the distance with a thoughtful gaze. Then she turned and werit inside again.
Xi-feng meanwhile was giving instructions for her dinner, and asked the maids if they had cooked her congee. They hurried off to inquire, and returned after a short while to report that the congee was ready.

'I should like a couple of dishes of those pickled vegetables that have just come up from the South, to go with it,, Xi-feng said. Autumn took charge of this and detailed the other maids to proceed with service. Patience came in and said with a smile:
'There's something I forgot to mention earlier, ma'am. At midday, while you were over at Her Old Ladyship's, one of the prioress's women from Water-moon Priory came to see you, to ask for a couple of jars of southern pickle and for an advance of a few months' allowance. The prioress has been in poor health, she told me. I asked what the matter was, and she said it had all started four or five days ago. She had been having trouble with some of the Buddhist and Taoist novices at the Priory, who despite several warnings kept leaving their lights on at night. Then one night she noticed the lamps still burning at midnight, and called to them several times. Hearing n6 reply and thinking that they must have fallen asleep with their lights on, she went herself to put them out. When she came back to her room, the strangest thing happened: she saw a man and a woman sitting together on the kang, and when she asked them who they were, had a noose slipped round her neck by way of reply. Her cries for help aroused the other sisters, who lit their lamps and came hurrying to the scene to find her prostrate on the floor and foaming at the mouth. Thank heavens they managed to bring her round. She still cannot eat proper meals, which is why she thought of asking for some pickles. Since you were not in) I felt I could hardly give her any on my own authority, so I explained where you were, said that I would mention it to you later, and sent her back to the Priory. I should have forgotten all about it if I hadn't heard you asking for pickles just now yourself.'
Xi-feng stared thoughtfully for a moment.
'There's no shortage of pickles,' she said at last. 'Send her some by all means. You can see Mr Qin in a day or two about the money.'
As she was speaking, **Crimson** came in to report the
arrival of a messenger from Jia Lian. Business had detained him out of town, and he would not be back that night. This had received a perfunctory acknowledgement from Xi-feng, when suddenly there was a burst of crying from the back of the house and one of the junior maids came running breathlessly into the courtyard. Patience was already there and now several of the other maids gathered round and began whispering among themselves.
'What's going on out there.?' asked Xi-feng.
'One of the maids has had a bit of a fright,' replied Patience. 'She says she's seen a ghost or something...'

‘Which maid?’ asked Xi-feng sharply. The maid in question entered the room.
‘What’s all this nonsense about ghosts?’ asked Xi-feng.
‘I was out at the back just now, ma’am,’ replied the maid, ‘asking one of the women for more charcoal to put on the braziers, when I heard this eerie noise coming from that small empty building. At first I thought it was just a cat chasing a mouse, but then I .heard it go *whee* like somebody sighing. I was very frightened and came running back.’
‘Stupid creature!’ snapped Xi-feng. ‘I won’t have people talking such superstitious nonsense in my presence! I’ve never believed in such things. Go on - get out of my sight!’
The maid fled. Xi-feng sent for Sunshine and checked through the day’s remaining accounts. It was nearly nine o clock by the time they finished. She and the others sat for a while chatting, and then she sent the servants off duty for the night and went to bed herself. Just before eleven o’clock she was lying in bed still half-asleep, when suddenly her flesh begin to creep and she awoke with. a start. She lay there trembling in ever-increasing terror until she could bear it no longer, and called Patience and Autumn to come over and keep her com p any. Neither of them could understand the strange state slie was in.
Autumn had originally been rather hostile to Xi-feng, but she had fallen from favour with Jia Lian because of the part she played in the persecution of You Er-jie and had subsequently been drawn into Xi-feng’s camp, though her loyalty remained a matter of convenience and did not compare with the devotion of Patience. On this occasion, seeing her mistress in such a troubled state, she stood dutifully by the bedside and served her with tea. Xi-feng took a sip and said:
‘Thank you. You can go back to sleep now. I shall be quite all right with Patience here.’
But Autumn was eager to please, and protested:
‘Surely ma’am, if you can’t get to sleep, it would be best if we took it in turns to sit up with you?’
Xi-feng had already dozed off. The maids heard a distant cockcrow and, seeing that Xi-feng was now fast asleep, both lay down fully dressed until daybreak, when they rose and busily began making preparations for her morning toilet. When she awoke, Xi-feng’s mind was still haunted by the terrors of the night. Despite her shaky state, her habitual determination to keep going at all costs prevailed, and with a great effort she struggled up. She was sitting rapt in thought when she heard a maid in the courtyard calling:
‘Is Patience in?’
Patience called out in reply, and the maid lifted the door-curtain and came in. It turned out that she had been sent by Lady Wang to summon Jia Lian.
‘There’s a messenger from the yamen on urgent business,’ she said, ~and as the Master has just gone out, Her Ladyship sent me to ask for Mr Lian to come over.’
Xi-feng caught her breath in alarm. To ascertain the nature of this urgent business, please turn to the next chapter.

CHAPTER 89

Our hero sees the handiwork of a departed love,
and is moved to write an ode
Frowner falls prey to hysterical fear
and resolves to starve to death

We have seen in the last chapter how Xi-feng forced herself to get up, and was sitting brooding in her apartment, when suddenly a maid arrived with news of some fresh crisis.
‘What has happened?’ she asked in alarm.
‘I don’t know, ma’am,’ replied the maid. ‘A messenger has come from the Ministry for the Master. One of the pages on the inner gate reported to Her Ladyship, and Her Ladyship sent me here to ask for Mr Lian.’
Xi-feng became slightly calmer when she realized that it was only a Ministry affair.
‘Will you tell Her Ladyship,’ she said, ‘that Mr Lian was away last night on business and has not yet returned. She had better send round for Mr Zhen at the other mansion.
‘Yes ma’ am.’ The maid departed.
Presently Cousin Zhen came over to Rong-guo House to receive the messenger from the Ministry. Having ascertained the facts, he went in to report to Lady Wang.

‘The messenger says that yesterday the President of the **Yellow** River Conservancy Board presented a memorial, describing the bursting of dykes throughout Honan Province and the flooding of several prefectures, departments and districts. They are allocating funds for reconstruction of city walls. This is going to mean a lot of extra administrative work for the senior officials at the Ministry, and they wished to inform Sir Zheng at once.’

Having said this, Cousin Zhen withdrew. Jia Zheng was informed directly upon his return, and for most of the winter he was kept very busy and spent nearly all of his time at the Ministry. Although for Bao-yu this meant a period of less intensive studying, fear of being detected by his father still caused him to keep up his attendance at school, and inhibited him from spending much time with Dai-yu.

One morning in the middle of the tenth month, Bao-yu rose and. prepared to set off as usual for school. The weather had suddenly turned chilly, and he saw Aroma come in with a bundle of winter clothes.

‘It’s very cold today,’ she said. ‘You’ll need to wrap up well.’

She chose a garment for him to wear and wrapped up another, which she entrusted to one of the younger maids. The maid went out and gave it to Tealeaf, saying:

‘As it’s so cold today, you are to have this ready in case Master Bao wants to change.’

Tealeaf acknowledged these instructions, and followed Bao-yu to school with the felt-wrapped bundle in his arms.

On arrival, Bao-yu sat down to work. He was soon distracted from his books by the sound of the paper casements vibrating in the wind.

‘The weather seems to have taken a turn for the worse, observed the Preceptor, opening a touch-hole in one of the windows and looking out. A great bank of dark clouds in the north-west was surging steadily across the sky. Tealeaf came into the classroom.

‘It’s getting colder, Master Bao. You had better put something warmer on.’

Bao-yu nodded, and Tealeaf walked across the room. The sight of the garment he was carrying had a most curious effect on Bao-yu, who gazed at it as if in a trance. The other boys watched with fascination.

‘Why did you have to bring this?’ asked Bao-yu. ‘Who gave it to you?’

He had recognized it at once as the Peacock Gold snow-cape, the one that Skybright had so bravely mended for him during her last illness.

‘The maids wrapped it up and told me to bring it,’ replied Tealeaf.

‘Well, I’m not feeling particularly cold,’said Bao-yu. ‘I don’t think I’ll wear it just now. You may as well wrap it up again.’

The Preceptor supposed that Bao-yu was reluctant to spoil so fine a garment, and noted with gratification this evidence of thrift.

‘Please put it on, Master Bao!’ pleaded Tealeaf. ‘For my sake! You know I’ll get the blame if you catch a cold.’

With extreme reluctance Bao-yu put it on, sat down again and stared glumly at his books. The Preceptor presumed that he was concentrating once more on his studies and gave the incident no further thought.

That afternoon, when the day’s lessons were over, Baoyu said that he felt unwell and asked to be excused from school the next day. Dai-ru had, of late, come to view his students in a more lenient light, more as compani9ns with whom to while away his old age. His own health was poor, and he was glad to lessen his burden of work by the judicious dispensation of sick-leave. Besides, he knew that Sir Zheng had more important matters on his mind, and that Grandmother Jia always indulged her favourite grandson. With a nod he indicated to Bao-yu that his request was granted.

Bao-yu went straight home. After calling briefly on his mother and grandmother, neither of whom questioned his plea of illness, he returned to the Garden. He was not at all his usual smiling talkative self, in fact he hardly said a word to Aroma and the others, but lay down dressed as he was on the kang.

‘Dinner’s ready,’ said Aroma. ‘Do you want it now, or will you wait till later?’

Bao-yu: ‘I won’t have anything to eat. I’m not feeling well. You just have yours.

Aroma: ‘Well, you might at least take off that lovely cape. You’ll crumple it and ruin it.’

Bao-yu: ‘I want to keep it on.’

Aroma: ‘It’s not just the cape that I’m worried about. Look how carefully it’s been darned. You’ll spoil the stitching.’

This touched Bao-yu to the quick. He heaved a deep sigh.

‘Oh all right! Put it away then. Wrap it up carefully. I shall never wear it again.

He stood up to take it off. Aroma came over to take it from him, but he had already begun to fold it himself

‘Why are you being so industrious today?’ she asked in surprise.

He made no reply but went on folding.

‘Where’s the wrapper?’ he asked when he had finished.

Musk handed it to him, and as he carefully wrapped the cape, she turned to give Aroma a wink. Bao-yu took no notice of them but sat down, looking thoroughly dejected. The clock on the shelf chimed, and he glanced down at his watch. It was already half-past five. Shortly afterwards a junior maid came in to light the lamps.

‘If you won’t have a proper meal, at least have a little hot congee,’ pleaded Aroma. ‘If you go to bed on an empty stomach you could easily catch a fever. And then think of all the trouble we’ll have.’

He shook his head.

‘I’m not hungry. I’d only feel worse if I tried to force something down.’

‘Well in that case,’ said Aroma, ‘you should at least have an early night.’

She and Musk made his bed and Bao-yu lay down. He tossed and turned, but found it quite impossible to get to sleep. Finally, just before dawn, he dozed off, only to awake again half an hour later. Aroma and Musk were already up and about.

‘I heard you tossing and turning till the early hours,’ said Aroma. ‘I didn’t dare disturb you. Then I fell asleep myself. Did you manage to sleep in the end?’

‘A bit. But I woke up again almost at once.

‘Have you got a pain anywhere?’ ‘No. I just feel depressed.’

‘Will you be going to school today?’

‘No. I asked for the day off yesterday. I thought I might go for a walk in the Garden to try and throw off this depression. But I think it will be too cold. Will you tell them to clear a room for me and put an incense burner and my writing things in it? I won’t need you today. I just want to sit quietly on my own for a while. Tell the others I don’t want to be disturbed.’

‘Of course no one will disturb you if you want to study quietly,’ said Musk as soon as she heard this.

‘I think it’s an excellent idea,’ said Aroma. ‘You will be able to keep warm, and a day of studying on your own will help you to feel more settled.’ She added: ‘But please, if you don’t feel like eating a proper meal, have *something*. What would you like? Tell me now, and I can get them to prepare it in the kitchen.’

‘Whatever’s easiest,’ replied Bao-yu. ‘Don’t go to a lot of fuss. It would be nice to have some fruit in the room, for the scent.’

‘Which room would you prefer?’ asked Aroma. ‘They are all rather cluttered, except Skybright’s old room, which has been empty for quite a while. That might be a bit cold and lonely though.’

‘That doesn’t matter,’ said Bao-yu. ‘Have the charcoal brazier moved in there.’

Aroma ~gave instructions for this to be done, and as she was speaking a maid came in carrying a tray with a bowl and a pair of ivory chopsticks, which she handed to Musk, saying:

‘Here’s the soup Miss Hua ordered from the kitchen.’

Musk took the tray and saw that the bowl contained Bird’s Nest Soup.

‘Is this what you ordered?’ she asked Aroma.

‘Yes,’ replied Aroma with a smile. ‘I thought that as Master Bao had nothing to eat last night- and as he spent most of the night tossing in bed, he’d feel rather empty this morning, so I sent the younger maids to order this specially from the kitchen.’

She told the maid to bring up a table, and Musk served Bao-yu with the soup. When he had drunk it and rinsed his mouth, Ripple came in:

‘The room’s ready,’ she said. ‘We’re waiting for the fire to get going properly and the air to clear, and then you can go in, Master Bao.’

He nodded, but was too lost in thought to reply. Shortly afterwards a maid came in to report that his writing things had been laid out. She received a perfunctory acknowledgement from Bao-yu and was immediately followed by another maid, who announced that breakfast was ready and asked where he wanted it served.

‘Oh, just bring it in here,’ said Bao-yu. ‘There’s no need to make all this fuss.’

The maid went out and returned with his breakfast. Bao-yu laughed and turning to Musk and Aroma said:

‘I feel so depressed. I honestly don’t think I could manage this on my own. Why don’t you two join me? That might make the food taste sweeter, and then perhaps I might be able to eat more of it...

Musk smiled.

‘That’s just a whim of yours, Master Bao. You know it wouldn’t be right for us to eat with you.’

‘I don’t agree,’ said Aroma. ‘We’ve often drunk wine together in the past. I think it can be allowed as an exception, to cheer him up. Though of course as a regular practice it would be quite out of the question.

So the three of them sat down, Bao-yu at the head and the two maids at either side of the table. After breakfast, one of the junior maids brought in the 'rinsing' tea, and Musk and Aroma supervised the clearing of the table. The tea was served and Bao-yu sat in gloomy silence again.
'Is the room ready yet?' he asked eventually.
'Ripple came in earlier on to tell you,' said Musk. 'What a silly question!'
After sitting there a moment longer, he made his way over to Skybright's old room. Having lit a stick of incense and arranged - the fruit on the table, he dismissed all the maids and closed the door. Aroma and the others stood outside with bated breath.
He selected a length of **pink** paper with a gold-splash on it and flower patterns in the corners, said a short prayer, raised his brush and began to write:

FROM
GREEN BOY
TO
SISTER SKYBRIGHT
MAY THIS ODE
OFFERED
WITH
LIBATION OF TEA
AND
BURNING OF PRECIOUS INCENSE FIND
ACCEPTANCE
IN YOUR SIGHT

O Sweetest and most
Inseparable friend!
Alas! that in so cruel a storm
Your life should end!
Your voice is gone, its tender
Music none can learn.
Forever eastward flows the stream,
Never to return.
Though dreams may never show
Your face to me again,
I see the Peacock Cape and feel
A haunting pain.

When he had finished writing, Bao-yu took a burning joss-stick, held the paper to it and set the ode alight. He sat in silence until the bundle of incense-sticks had burned to the end, then opened the door and walked out.
'Why are you coming Out again so soon?' inquired Aroma. 'Are you feeling low again?'
He feigned a laugh.
'I was rather depressed earlier on. I needed to be on my own for a bit in a quiet place. I feel better now. I think I shall take a stroll.'
He walked straight out into the Garden. When he reached the Naiad's House, he called from the courtyard:
'Is Cousin Lin at home?'
'Who's that?' replied Nightingale.
She raised the door-curtain and saw him standing there.
'Oh it's you, Master Bao,' she said with a smile. 'Miss Lin is inside. Please come in and sit down.'
As Bao-yu went in with her, Dai-yu's voice could be heard from the inner room:
'Nightingale, please ask Master Bao to come in and wait a moment.'
Bao-yu, walking towards the inner room, stopped to admire the pair of calligraphic scrolls that hung one on either side of the doorway. The calligraphy looked recent and had been done on strips of dark **purple** paper, splashed with gold and decorated with a pattern of clouds and dragons. The two lines ran:

> Through casement **green** the moon shines brightly still; In bamboo chronicles the ancients are but empty words.

Bao-yu read them with an appreciative smile and passed through into the inner room.

'What are you doing, coz?' he inquired with a smile.

Dai-yu stood up, took a couple of steps towards him, smiled and said:

'Please sit down. I'm copying out part of this sutra. I only have two lines left to do. I'll lust finish and then we can sit and chat.'

She told Snowgoose to pour him some tea.

'Please carry on writing,' said Bao-yu. 'Don't take any notice of me.'

His attention had been caught by a painting hanging on the centre wall of the room. It was a vertical scroll showing Chang E, the Moon Goddess, with one of her attendants, and another fairy, also with an attendant who was carrying what seemed to be a long bag containing clothes. Apart from the clouds that surrounded the figures, there were no background details of any kind. The linear style of the picture was reminiscent of the Song master Li Long-mian. It bore the title 'The Contest in the Cold', written in the antique *ba-fen* style.

'Have you hung this picture of the Contest in the Cold here recently, coz?' asked Bao-yu.

'Yes. I remembered it yesterday while they were tidying the room, and so I brought it out and told.them to hang it up.

'What's the allusion in the title?'

Dai-yu laughed.

'Surely you know! It's such a well-known poem... 'I can't quite recall it at present,' confessed Bao-yu, smiling rather sheepishly. 'Please tell me.'

'Don't you remember Li Shang-yin's. lines:

Braving the cold, Fairy Frost and Lady Moon Parade their rival charms...'?

'Of course!' exclaimed Bao-yu. 'How exquisite! And what an unusual subject! This is the perfect time of year to have it up too.'

He continued to amble round the room, inspecting it in a leisurely fashion, and Snowgoose brought him a cup of tea. He drank his tea, and in a few minutes Dai-yu finished the section of the sutra she was copying, and stood up.

'Forgive me,' she said.

'You know you don't have to stand on ceremony with me,' he replied with a smile.

He observed that she was wearing a little pale **blue** fur-lined dress embroidered with flowers, and an ermine-lined sleeveless jacket, while her hair was coiled up in her everyday style and had no flowers in it but Only a flat hairpin of purest gold. Her padded underskirt was **pink**, and embroidered with flowers. How graceful she seemed, as a jade tree leaning in the wind; how gentle, as a fragrant lotus whose petals are moist with dew!

'Have you been playing your Qin at all these last few days?' he inquired.

'Not for a day or two. This sutra-copying makes my hands too cold.'

'Maybe. it's just as well,' said Bao-yu. 'I know the Qin is a fine thing in its way, but I can't see that it does any real good. I have never heard of it bringing prosperity or long life; it only seems to cause sorrow and distress. And it must be such a labour to memorize those tablatures. I think, coz, that with your delicate constitution you should avoid anything so strenuous.'

Dai-yu smiled somewhat scornfully.

'Is that the Qin you play?' Bao-yu went on, pointing to one hanging on the wall. 'Isn't it rather short?'

'Not really,' explained Dai-yu. 'When I was a little girl and first started learning, I couldn't reach on an ordinary Qin, so we had this one specially made. It's not a collector's piece of course, made with wood 'saved from the flames' - but it has a Crane Fairy and a Phoenix Tail, and the Dragon's Pool sound-hole and Goose Foot tuning-pegs are all in the correct proportions. And look at the crackling on the varnish. Doesn't that look just like Cow Hair crackle to you? The fine workmanship gives it a beautiful tone.'

'Have you been writing any poetry recently, coz?' Baoyu went on to inquire.

'Not much, not since the last meeting of the club.'

He laughed. 'You can't fool me. I heard you chanting. How did it go now?

Why grieve to watch
The wheel of Karma turn?
A moonlike purity remains

My constant goal...

I found your setting very striking. You did write it didn't you?'

Dai-yu: 'How did you come to hear it?'

Bao-yu: 'I heard you playing when I was walking back from Smartweed Loggia a few days ago. The music was so lovely and I didn't want to interrupt you, so I just listened quietly for a while and then went on my way. There is one thing I've been meaning to ask you. I noticed that in the first part you use a level-tone rhyme, but suddenly change to an oblique tone at the end. Why is that?'

Dai-yu: 'That is free composition. One doesn't have to abide by any rules. One just goes wherever the inspiration takes one.'

Bao-yu: 'I see! I'm afraid such subtleties were lost on my untrained ears.'

Dai-yu: 'True lovers of music have always been few.'

Bao-yu realized that without meaning to he had said the wrong thing, and was afraid that he had alienated Dai-yu. He sat there for a while. There was so much he wanted to say, but he was now too nervous to open his mouth again. Dai-yu had also spoken without thinking, and on reflection she wished that she had not been so scathing, and withdrew silently into her shell. Her silence only increased Bao-yu's own misgivings, and finally in some embarrassment he stood up and said:

'I must be on my way to see Tan. Please don't get up.'

'Give her my regards when you see her, will you?' said Dai-yu.

'I will,' he replied, and departed. Dai-yu saw him to the door, then returned to her chair and sat brooding to herself.

'Bao-yu's been so odd recently. He doesn't seem to say what he's thinking. He's friendly one minute and distant the next. I wonder what it means?'

Nightingale came in. 'Have you finished copying for today, Miss? Shall I put your writing things away now?'

'I shan't be doing any more,' replied Dai-yu. 'You can clear them away.'

Dai-yu went into the inner room and lay down on her bed, slowly turning all these things over in her mind. Nightingale came in to ask if she would like some tea.

'No, thank you. I just want to be alone and lie down for a bit.'

'Very well, Miss.' Nightingale went out, to find Snowgoose standing in the doorway, staring oddly in front of her. She went up to her and said:

'What's the matter with you?' Snowgoose was lost in thought, and the question gave her quite a turn.

'Sh! Don't say a word! I've heard something very strange. If I tell you, you must promise not to breathe a word to anyone.

As she said this Snowgoose shot her lips out in the direction of Dai-yu's bedroom, then began walking away, nodding to Nightingale to follow her. They reached the foot of the terrace and she began again in a whisper:

'Have you heard that Bao-yu's engaged to be married?' Nightingale gave a start. 'I don't believe you! It can't be true!' 'It is! Nearly everyone knows except us. 'Who told you?'

'Scribe. His fiancée is a prefect's daughter. She's very good-looking and comes from a wealthy family.'

As Snowgoose was speaking, Nightingale heard Dai-yu cough and thought she could hear her getting up again. Worried that she might come out and overhear them, she took Snowgoose by the hand and motioned to her to be silent. She looked inside, but all seemed quiet. She asked Snowgoose in a low whisper:

'What exactly did Scribe say?'

'Do you remember,' replied Snowgoose, 'a day or two ago you sent me to Miss Tan's to thank her for something? Well, she wasn't home, but Scribe was. We started chatting, and one of us happened to mention Master Bao and his naughty ways. Scribe said: "When will Master Bao ever grow up? He doesn't take anything seriously. And to think that he's engaged to be married now - and still as silly as ever!" I asked her if the engagement had been settled, and she said that it had and that the go-between was a Mr Wang, a close relation on the Ning-guo side, so the whole thing was a foregone conclusion.'

Nightingale put her head thoughtfully to one side. 'How very strange!' she thought to herself.

'Why has no one in the family mentioned it?' she asked Snowgoose.

'That's Her Old Ladyship's idea - so Scribe said. It's in case Bao-yu finds out and is distracted from his studies. She made me promise not to tell a soul, and said she would blame *me* if word got around.'

Snowgoose pointed towards the house.

'That's why I haven't mentioned it in front of *her*. But today when you asked, I thought I could tell you the truth.'

As she was speaking there was a loud squawk from the parrot:

‘Miss Lin’s back! Put the kettle on!’
The two maids had the fright of their lives and turned round expecting to see Dai-yu. But seeing no one, and realizing their mistake, they scolded the bird and went inside. They found Dai-yu at her chair. She was out of breath and had clearly only just sat down. Nightingale asked rather awkwardly if she wanted any tea or water.
‘Where have you two been all this time?’ asked Dai-yu. ‘No one came when I called.’
She walked back to the kang and lay down once more facing the wall, telling them to let down the bed-curtains. They did so and left the room, each secretly thinking to herself that she had overheard them, but neither daring to say so.
Dai-yu, brooding on her bed, *had* heard them whispering outside and had crept to the door to eavesdrop. Details of their conversation eluded her but the main substance was clear. She felt as though plunged into a great ocean. The prophecy contained in her nightmare was to be fulfilled after all. Bitterness and grief overwhelmed her. There was Only one way of escape left. She must die. She must not live to see this dreaded thing take place. Without Bao-yu what would life be worth anyway? She had no parents of her own to turn to. Surely if she neglected herself daily from now on, in a few months she would be able to undermine her health and leave this world and all its troubles behind her?
Having formed this resolution, without bothering to pull up her quilt or put on any extra clothes she closed her eyes and pretended to be asleep. Nightingale and Snow-goose came in several times to wait on her, but seeing no sign of movement did not dare disturb her, even for dinner. Later, when the lamps were lit, Nightingale peeped through the curtains and saw that she had fallen asleep with her covers in a crumpled heap at her feet. Afraid she might catch cold, Nightingale gently pulled them over her. Dai-yu lay still until she had gone, then pushed them back again.
Meanwhile Nightingale questioned Snowgoose again:
‘Are you sure you weren’t making it up?’
‘Of course I wasn’t!’ replied Snowgoose rather indignantly.
Nightingale: ‘But how did Scribe come to know?’
Snowgoose: ‘It was **Crimson** that heard it first at Mrs Lian’s.’
Nightingale: ‘I think Miss Lin must have overheard us. I can tell that something has upset her greatly. We must be careful never to mention it again.’
The two maids tidied up and made themselves ready for bed. Nightingale went in to see how Dai-yu was and found the quilt in the same crumpled heap as before. She pulled it lightly back. That night passed without further event.
The next morning Dai-yu rose early without waking either of the maids, and sat up on her own; lost in thought. Nightingale awoke to find her already up and said in surp4se:
‘You’re up very early this morning, Miss!’
‘I know I am,’ replied Dai-yu rather curtly. ‘It’s be-cause I went to sleep so early last night.’
Nightingale quickly dressed and woke Snowgoose, and the two of them waited on Dai-yu at her toilet. She sat staring into the mirror. Tears began to stream down her face, and her silk scarf was soon wet through. In the poet’s words:

A wasted face
reflected in the spring stream;
And pity flows
from face to mirror’d face
and back again.

> Nightingale stood by, not daring to utter a single comforting word, for fear that she would say the wrong thing and cause further anguish. Dai-yu sat motionless for a considerable while, then finally began her morning toilet, negligently, her eyes still brimming with tears. When it was done, she remained sitting where she was for a few minutes, then asked Nightingale to light some of the Tibetan incense.

‘But Miss,’ protested Nightingale, ‘you’ve hardly had any sleep. What do you want to go lighting incense for? You’re surely not going to start copying the sutra again are you?’
Dai-yu nodded.
‘But you woke so early, Miss. If you start writing now you’ll exhaust yourself.’
‘What does that matter? The sooner it’s finished the better. I only want to do it to keep myself occupied anyway. And in days to come you will have my writing to remember me by.’

As she said this tears began to pour down her cheeks, and Nightingale was no longer able to offer consolation but burst into tears herself.

Dai-yu was resolved that from this day forward she would deliberately destroy her health. She soon lost her appetite, and gradually began to waste away. Bao-yu visited her whenever he could after school, but although there were a million things she wanted to tell him, her consciousness that they were no longer children inhibited her from showing her affection by teasing him in the old way, and rendered her powerless to express what was preying on her mind. Bao-yu for his part would have liked to talk with her sincerely and offer her some genuine comfort; but he was afraid of aggravating her illness by offending her in some way, and so when he did see her, he merely inquired politely how she was feeling and added a few words of encouragement. Theirs was a true case of estrangement in the very extremity of love.

Grandmother Jia and Lady Wang showed a motherly concern for Dai-yu, which however went no further than calling in the doctor. Not knowing the inner source of her illness, they put it down to her sickly constitution, and Nightingale and Snowgoose were much too afraid to tell them the truth. Dai-yu weakened day by day. After a

> fortnight her stomach had shrunk to the point where she could no longer bring herself to eat even gruel. Every conversation she overheard during the day seemed to her to be connected in some way with Bao-yu's marriage. Every servant she saw from **Green** Delights seemed to be involved in the preparations. When Aunt Xue came to visit her, Bao-chai's absence confirmed her suspicions. She began to hope that no one would come to see her. She refused to take her medicine. Her only remaining wish was to be left alone, and to die as quickly as possible. In her dreams she constantly heard people addressing the new 'Mrs Bao', and her mind grew totally obsessed with the idea, like the proverbial drinker who, seeing a curved bow reflected in his cup, is convinced that he has swallowed a snake.

A few weeks of this self-imposed starvation and it seemed as if she must soon die. Even the thinnest of gruels was now an impossibility. Her breathing was scarcely perceptible. She was hanging on by the slenderest thread. To learn whether she was to survive this crisis or not, please turn to the next chapter.

CHAPTER 90

A poor girl loses a padded jacket and puts up
with some obstreperous behaviour
A young man accepts a tray of sweetmeats and
is put out by some devious goings-on

During the first week or so of Dai-yu's decline, when Grandmother Jia and her aunts had taken it in turns to visit her, she had still possessed strength enough to make an occasional response to their inquiries. But now she would eat nothing whatsoever, and for several days had hardly said a word. The strange thing was that although at times she seemed unconscious, there were periods when she was perfectly lucid. They began to suspect something, and interrogated Nightingale and Snowgoose more than once. But the maids were too scared to say what they knew. Nightingale for her part, while she would have liked to discover the latest news from Scribe, feared that the truth would only provide a further shock and hasten the hour of Dai-yu's death, and so when she saw Scribe, she avoided the subject completely. Snowgoose, as the transmitter of the news, felt responsible for Dai-yu's condition and longed for a hundred tongues to cry out 'I never said a word!' She too, when questioned, maintained a close silence.

Nightingale, seeing that Dai-yu would eat nothing, and judging that all hope was now gone, stood by her bedside crying for a while, then went outside and whispered to
Snowgoose:

'Go in and watch her carefully. I'm going straight over to tell Her Old Ladyship, Her Ladyship and Mrs Lian. She has definitely taken a turn for the worse today.'

She departed, and Snowgoose went in to take her place.

She found Dai-yu lying very still, as if in a deep sleep. Being only a child with no experience of such things, she took this state for death itself, and began to feel both tearful and frightened. If only Nightingale would hurry up and come back! At that very moment she heard footsteps outside the window. That must be Nightingale now! Breathing a sigh of relief, she stood up at once and went to the doorway of the inner chamber, lifting the door-curtain in expectation. She heard the swish of the outer door-curtain, and in came

not Nightingale but Scribe, sent by Tan-chun to inquire how Dai-yu was. Seeing Snowgoose standing in the inner doorway, she asked:
'How is Miss Lin?'
Snowgoose nodded to her to come in and Scribe entered the inner room with her. She noticed that Nightingale was not there, and when she looked at Dai-yu and saw how feebly she was breathing, a look of horror came over her face.
'Where's Nightingale gone?' she asked.
'To tell their Ladyships,' replied Snowgoose.
Certain that Dai-yu, if not actually dead, was by this time at any rate 'dead to the world', Snowgoose decided to take advantage of Nightingale's absence to question Scribe. Taking her by the hand, she asked in a whisper:
'Did you really mean what you said the other day about Mr Wang, and Master Bao's betrothal?'
'Of course I did!' replied Scribe.
'When was it settled?'
'I never said it was! What I told you was just what I'd heard from Crimson. Later I was at Mrs Lian's myself, and heard her say to Patience that the whole thing was something the Master's literary gentlemen had thought up, to please him and provide themselves with a connection. As it happened Lady Xing didn't even think it a good match. But even if she had approved, everyone knows how unreliable her judgement is. Besides, Her Old Ladyship already has someone else in mind for Master Bao, someone here in the Garden. Lady Xing had no idea of that, of course, and Her Old Ladyship only allowed them to go ahead with the normal inquiries for the Master's sake. Mrs Lian said Her Old Ladyship wants Bao-yu to marry one of his cousins, and her mind is quite made up, so any other proposals are a waste of time.'
Snowgoose was beside herself.
'Then our mistress is dying for nothing!' she exclaimed.
'What *do* you mean?' asked Scribe.
'Don't you know? The other day Miss Lin overheard me telling Nightingale about the betrothal - that's why she has brought herself to this terrible state now.
'Sh!' whispered Scribe. 'She might hear you!'
'She's completely dead to the world,' replied Snow-goose. 'Look - she can't last more than a day or two now.
As she was speaking, the door-curtain was drawn aside and in came Nightingale.
'For goodness' sake!' she exclaimed. 'Can't you two do your gossiping somewhere else? You might as well *drive* her to her death!'
'I simply cannot believe such strange goings-on,' muttered Scribe.
'My dear Scribe,' retorted Nightingale, 'don't misunderstand me please. I didn't mean to offend you, But you must be so stupid to gossip like that.'
The three of them were interrupted by a sudden cough from Dai-yu's bed on the kang. Nightingale hurried to the bedside, while Snowgoose and Scribe stoo4 in silence. Nightingale bent down and whispered to Dai-yu, who was lying with her face to the wall:
'Would you like some water, Miss?'
There was a barely audible 'yes' and Snowgoose promptly filled a cup half-full with hot water and handed it to Nightingale, who held it in the palm of her hand. Scribe meanwhile had moved towards the kang and was about to speak to Dai-yu when Nightingale motioned to
her not to say anything and she checked herself. They stood waiting. After a short interval Dai-yu coughed again and Nightingale inquired at once:
'Would you like the water now, Miss?'
There was another faint 'yes' and Dai-yu seemed to want to lift her head, but was too feeble to do so. Nightingale climbed up onto the kang by her side and, holding the cup in her hand, first tested the water to make sure it was not too hot, then raised it to Dai-yu's mouth, supporting her head until the rim of the cup reached her lips. Dai-yu took a sip, and Nightingale was about to remove the cup when she saw that Dai-yu wanted some more. She held the cup where it was. Dai-yu drank again, shook her head to show that it was enough, took a deep breath and lay down once more. After a pause she opened her eyes a fraction and asked:
'Was that Scribe I heard talking just now?'
'Yes, Miss,' replied Nightingale.
Scribe was still in the room and came up to the kang at once to convey Tan-chun's message. Dai-yu stared at her for a minute and nodded. After a pause she said:

‘When you go home, give Miss Tan my regards will you?’
Scribe took this to mean that Dai-yu wanted her to leave and made her way quietly out of the room.
Now although Dai-yu’s condition was extremely grave, her power of reason was unimpaired. She was aware of Scribe’s arrival and vaguely heard the first words she exchanged with Snowgoose. She felt too exhausted to cope with a visitor, and so pretended to be asleep. But as the conversation progressed, it became clear to her that what she had taken to be a fact had never been more than a proposal. And then she heard Scribe repeat Xi-feng’s words, that Grandmother Jia intended to marry Bao-yu to one of his cousins, to one that lived in the Garden; and who could that be but herself? Just as at the winter solstice Yin gives birth to Yang, so now in her mind darkness gave way to light. She suddenly felt much clearer within herself, decided to drink some water and even spoke to Scribe.
It was at this moment that Grandmother Jia, Lady Wang, Li Wan and Xi-feng arrived on the scene, in response to Nightingale’s urgent summons. Now that Dai-yu’s inner doubts had been so dramatically dissipated, she no longer presented the spectacle of the dying maiden that Nightingale had led them to expect. She was still weak and low in spirits, but was able with an effort to say a few words in reply to their inquiries. Xi-feng called Nightingale over and questioned her:
‘Miss Lin is not nearly as ill as you made out. Why did you exaggerate so? We were most alarmed.’
‘Honestly, ma’am,’ replied Nightingale, ‘only a while ago she was in a bad way. That’s why I came over. I would never have dared to bother you otherwise. She does seem a lot better now. It’s most strange.
Grandmother Jia said to Xi-feng with a smile:
‘You shouldn’t take what she says so seriously, my dear. She doesn’t understand such things. Mind you she was quite right to speak up if she noticed anything the matter. I’ve no time for young people who never say a word or do anything for fear of appearing foolish.’
The ladies stayed for a few minutes chatting, then, deciding that all was well, returned to their apartments.
Truly:

No remedy but love
Can make the lovesick well;
Only the hand that tied the knot
Can loose the tiger’s bell.

After this Dai-yu’s condition continued to improve steadily, and Snowgoose and Nightingale offered many a secret prayer of thanks to the Lord Buddha.
‘Thank goodness she’s better!’ said Snowgoose to
Nightingale. ‘But what an odd illness! And what an odd way to get better!’
‘We know what caused it,’ said Nightingale. ‘It’s this sudden recovery that’s puzzling. I think Bao-yu and Miss Lin must be destined to be married after all. ‘The course of true love never did run smooth’, but ‘Marriages made in heaven can never be broken’ either! You can tell they are destined to be together. That’s what they both want in their hearts, and that must be what Heaven has decreed for them. Remember what happened to Bao-yu last year, when I told him Miss Lin was going home to the South? He nearly died of shock, and made the most terrible scene. And now that one remark of ours has nearly been the death of her. Theirs must be a bond from some previous life, made a century ago at the Rock of Rebirth!’
They exchanged a secret smile at this romantic theory, and Snowgoose exclaimed:
‘Thank goodness she’s better anyway! We must never mention it again! Even if Bao-yu were to marry another lady and I witnessed the wedding with my own eyes, I swear I wouldn’t breathe a word of it to anyone.’
Nightingale laughed.
‘Well said!’
Theirs were not the only secret discussions on this subject. Dai-yu’s strange illness and stranger recovery gave rise to a great deal of whispering and speculation in the household, which soon reached the ears of Xi-feng. Lady Wang and Lady Xing vaguely suspected something, and Grandmother Jia herself had a shrewd idea what was at the bottom of it all. The four ladies were gathered one day in Grandmother Jia’s apartment, and in the course of their conversation the subject of Dai-yu’s illness came up.
‘There is something I want to say to you all,’ said Grandmother Jia. ‘Bao-yu and Miss Lin have been together ever since they were little, and this has never troubled me, as I have always thought of them as children. But of late I have noticed how frequent these illnesses of hers are becoming - how suddenly they come, and how suddenly they go - a sure sign that she is growing up. It really won’t do to allow them to stay together indefinitely. What do you all think?’

After a thoughtful silence Lady Wang replied, choosing her words with care:
'Miss Lin reads such a lot into things. And Bao-yu's childish manner is deceptive: he can be extremely stupid and tactless. If we remove either one of them from the Garden, won't it be too obvious? It has always been said that every boy becomes a groom and every girl becomes a bride. Don't you think, Mother, that a better solution would be to go ahead as quickly as possible and get them both married?'
Grandmother Jia frowned.
'I know that Miss Lin's peculiar temperament is in some ways attractive. But I don't think we could possibly have her as a wife for Bao-yu. Besides, I'm- afraid that with such a delicate constitution she is unlikely to live to any age. I'm sure Bao-chai is in every respect the more suitable choice.'
'Of course we all agree with you there, Mother,' said Lady Wang. 'But we must find a husband for Miss Lin too. If we do not, and if she has taken a fancy to Bao-yu -after all, it is only natural for a girl to have such feelings as she grows up - it might make things very -difficult if she were then to discover that he was already betrothed to Bao-chai.'
'There can be no question,' replied Grandmother Jia, 'of marrying an outsider before one of the family. The order must be: first to marry Bao-yu, then to have Miss Lin betrothed. Besides Miss Lin is two years younger than Bao-yu anyway. If I understand you correctly, we shall have to conceal Bao-yu's betrothal from her...'
Xi-feng turned at once to the various maids present:
'Is that clear? Not a *word* of Master Bao's betrothal to
anyone! If I catch one of you talking about it I shall show no mercy.
'Feng dear,' continued Grandmother Jia, 'I have noticed that since your illness you have taken less interest in what happens in the Garden. You really must give it more of your attention. It's not just the sort of thing we have been talking about. Any repetition of that disgraceful drinking and gambling that was discovered among the servants last year must be prevented at all costs. Be rather more particular, will you, and keep a watchful eye on what goes on. They need to be- disciplined, and you seem to be the one they respect most.'
'Yes, Grannie,' said Xi-feng.
The ladies sat talking for a while longer, then left to go their separate ways.

From now on Xi-feng began to inspect the Garden on a more regular basis. One day, in the course of one of her tours of inspection, she was walking along the bank by Amaryllis Eyot when she heard an old woman shouting outside the courtyard and went to investigate. As she drew near the old serving-woman caught sight of her, dropped her hands to her side and stood to attention, mumbling a confused 'Good morning, ma'am.'
'Why are you making such a racket out here?' asked Xi-feng.
'You and Mrs Zhu have given me a job to do here, ma'am,' replied the woman, 'looking after the flowerbeds and fruit-trees. I'd done nothing wrong, and Miss Xing's maid accused us of stealing..
'And why should she do that?' asked Xi-feng.
- 'Yesterday our Blackie came with me here to play,' replied the woman. 'She didn't know any better and went inside Miss Xing's apartment to have a look around. I sent her home straight away. Then early this morning I heard one of the maids say they'd lost something. When I asked what it was, she started questioning *me* all about it 'That's no cause for you to lose your temper,' retorted
Xi-feng.
what
'This Garden belongs to Mrs Zhu's family not hers!' protested the old woman. 'We work for Mrs Zhu and I won't be called a thief!'
Xi-feng spat straight in the old - woman's face and said harshly:
'Hold your tongue! That's quite enough! You're responsible for things here and if something is lost the maids are quite right to hold you accountable for it. How dare you talk such nonsense! Call Steward Lin and have her dismissed!'
The maids were carrying out her orders when Xing Xiu-yan came hurrying out. She greeted Xi-feng and said with an anxious smile:
'You mustn't do that! It was nothing really. And it's all over now.
'My dear girl,' said Xi-feng, 'that is not the right attitude to take. It's the principle I'm concerned with. The servants must learn to know their place.'
Xiu-yan saw that the woman was on her knees begging for mercy, and asked Xi-feng at once to go inside

with her and sit down.
'I know her sort,' said Xi-feng. 'They think they can get away with anything - except when I'm around.'
When Xiu-yan continued to plead for the woman, however, and insisted on putting the blame on her own maid, she relented.
'Out of consideration for Miss Xing,' she announced, 'I shall let you off this once.
The old woman came forward to kotow first to Xi-feng then to Xiu-yan, and left.
Once she had gone, Xiu-yan asked Xi-feng to be seated. 'What was it that you lost?' inquired Xi-feng pleasantly. 'Nothing of any importance,' replied Xiu-yan with a smile. 'Just an old **red** padded jacket of mine. I told them to look for it and when it didn't turn up thought no more about it. My maid was silly to question that woman. She was bound to take offence. My maid was very thoughtless and I've already ~given her a good talking to. The whole affair is over and best forgotten.'
While she was speaking, Xi-feng had been inspecting Xiu-yan's clothes and the general appearance of her apartment. Her few padded or fur-lined clothes looked rather worn and ineffective as protection against the cold. Most of her quilted bedding looked on the thin side too. She glanced at the furniture and the ornaments on her table, all of them provided by Grandmother Jia, and noticed how immaculately clean and tidy they had been kept. Xi-feng felt a warm respect towards her.
'I know a jacket is nothing to fuss over,' she said. 'But the weather is growing cold, and you need it to keep you warm. Of course you were right to question her. Honestly! The insolent way these servants carry on!'
She sat talking with Xiu-yan for a while and then left to continue her tour of inspection, stopping off in all the various residences before returning to her own apartment. There she instructed Patience to make up a parcel of her clothes to be sent over to Xiu-yan: it was to contain two padded jackets, one of dark-red imported silk, the other of viridian damask-silk lined with pearly lambswool, a long turquoise worsted skirt with brocade appliqué panels and an embroidered border, and a deep-**blue** ermine-lined jacket.
Despite Xi-feng's intervention on her behalf, Xiu-yan was still most mortified by the woman's rudeness. 'Of all the girls who live here,' she thought to herself, 'I'm the only one the servants would dare to offend in that way. They say things about me all the time. And now Feng has seen it for herself!'
The more she thought about it the more depressing her position seemed. And yet it was impossible for her to confide in anyone. Bowing to her fate, she was just beginning
to weep when she saw Xi-feng's maid Felicity come in carrying a bundle of clothes. Soon realizing whose they were, she absolutely refused to accept them.

'But Miss,' protested Felicity, 'Mrs Lian says that if you think they are too old she will change them for - newer ones.

Xiu-yan smiled politely.

'It's very thoughtful of her. But I can't possibly let her give me some of her clothes just because I've lost one of mine. Please take them back and thank her most kindly for me. I do appreciate the thought.'

She gave her a little purse, and Felicity departed with some reluctance, carrying the bundle. Minutes later she was back, this time accompanied by Patience. Xiu-yan

- hurried out to greet them and asked them both to be seated. Patience smiled and said:

'Mrs Lian says you should accept them as one of the family and not be so polite.'

'But I'm not being polite,' replied Xiu-yan. 'Honestly. I'd be embarrassed to take them.'

'Mrs Lian says,' persisted Patience, 'that if you won't take them it must either be because they're too old or because you don't like the idea of wearing her things. She says that if I take them back she'll be cross with me.'

Xiu-yan blushed and smiled gratefully:

'Well, in that case, how can I possibly refuse? Please convey my thanks to Mrs Lian.'

She served them both tea, after which Felicity and Patience left. They were almost home again when they met one of Aunt Xue's women. She greeted them, and Patience asked her where she was going.

'Mrs Xue and our young lady sent me over to convey their regards to all their Ladyships and young madams and young ladies. I was at Mrs Lian's just now asking for you, and she told me you'd gone into the Garden. Have you just been to Miss Xing's by any chance?'

'Why, how did you know that?' asked Patience.

'Oh, a little birdie told me... It's most generous I think, what you and your mistress are doing...
Patience gave a little laugh.

‘Won’t you come in and have a chat later on?’
‘I still have things to do. Another day,’ replied the old woman and went on her way, while Patience went in to report to Xi-feng.

When the serving-woman returned to the Xue household, which was in its usual state of upheaval, thanks to the disruptive behaviour of Xia Jin-gui, she recounted the story of Xing Xiu-yan’s humiliation, and both Aunt Xue and Bao-chai began to weep.
‘It’s only because Pan’s away,’ said Bao-chai, ‘that she has to go on suffering like this. We are lucky that Feng has been looking after her. In future we must keep more of an eye on her ourselves. She is after all practically one of the family now.’
As she was speaking Xue Ke came in.
‘In all the years he’s spent here Pan hasn’t made a single decent friend!’ he said. ‘They’re a pack of rogues the lot of them! I’m sure they don’t care in the slightest what happens to him. They’re only curious to know the latest news. This last couple of days I’ve told them all to go away, and I’ve given the janitors instructions not to -let any of them in.’
‘Is it that actor Jiang and his friends again?’ asked Aunt Xue.
‘No, as a matter of fact he hasn’t been here at all. It’s a different crowd.’
Xue Ke’s words intensified Aunt Xue’s anxiety.
‘Though I - have -a son,’ she said; ‘it is as though I had none. Even if Pan wins this reprieve, his life is ruined. You are only my nephew, Ke, but you show much more sense than Pan. I can see that from now on I shall have to depend on you. Be sure to work hard and make the most of your life. And think of your bride-to-be, who comes from a family that has fallen on hard times. It is always hard when a daughter goes out into the world and gets married. One can only pray that her husband will turn out well and be capable of providing for her. Imagine if Xiu-yan were to turn out like this creature here...’
Gesturing in the direction of Xia Jin-gui’s room Aunt Xue continued:
‘But I don’t want to talk about her. I know Xiu-yan to be an honest and thoughtful girl, thrifty and unspoilt. The sooner Pan’s business is settled; the sooner we can get the two of you married and set my poor heart at rest.’
‘Don’t forget that Bao-qin is still waiting to be married,’ Xue Ke reminded his aunt. ‘I know how concerned you are about that. Don’t-worry on our account.’
They stayed chatting together for a few minutes longer and then Xue Ke returned to his room. He ate his dinner and began to think about Xiu-yan in the Garden, forced by poverty t6 be so utterly dependent on the Jias. The two of them had travelled by the same boat on their original journey to the capital, and he had been able to see for himself that she was a pretty, good-natured girl. How unjust of destiny to give a creature like Xia Jin-gui a life of wealth and luxury and turn her int6 a spoilt shrew,- while for a girl like Xiu-yan there was nothing but hardship! What was in the mind of the Great Arbiter Yama when he made such a dispensation?
These gloomy thoughts stirred Xue Ke to. express his sense of injustice in poetic form. His was a~ untutored pen, but he did as best he could.

> As the flood-dragon flounders on the shore,
> So our two hearts languish under like privations.
> When will we drink this bitter cup no more
> And soar unfettered through the constellations?

He read the lines through and thought of sticking them up on his wall. He felt a little self-conscious however, and thought to himself:
‘What if someone sees the and makes fun of me…’
He read them through again.
‘Oh who cares! I *will* put them up. I can read them anyway, to cheer myself up.’
A final reading made him change his mind yet again, however, and he slipped them between the pages of a bo6k.
‘I’m old enough for us to be married now,’ he mused to himself. ‘But who could have foreseen this family crisis, and who knows when it will ever end? What an ordeal for a gentle girl like Xiu-yan! How lonely and wretched she must feel!’
At that moment the door was pushed open and Moonbeam came in carrying a round covered-tray and a jug

of wine, which she deposited with a simpering smile on the table. He rose and asked her to be seated. Still smiling she said:
'Four plates of sweetmeats and a small jug of wine, with Mrs Pan's compliments, Master Ke.'
'It's most kind of her,' replied Ke, 'but surely she could have sent one of the younger maids? She didn't need to bother you, Miss Moonbeam.'
'Oh Master Ke, there's no need to be so polite. It's all in the family after all... Mrs Pan knows what trouble~ you've been put to on account of Mr Pan, and she's been meaning for a long time to thank you herself but was afraid the others might take it the wrong way. In this household, as I think you know, sir, there's a lot goes on beneath the surface. People are only waiting to pounce on a little thing like a present, and then they start inventing all kinds of stories. That's why she's been ever so slightly discreet and asked me to come over personally with these few things today when no one was looking...'
She gave Xue Ke a saucy smile and continued:
'And please, no more of that 'Miss' Moonbeam - it makes me feel most uncomfortable. We are only here to serve, and if we can serve Mr Pan, then why not you as well?'
Xue Ke was young and had a trusting nature. It *was* odd that Pan's womenfolk should suddenly start treating him like this; but Moonbeam's explanation was a plausible one, he reflected.
'You can leave the sweetmeats,' he said. "But take the wine back with you. I've never been much of a drinker. Occasionally if pushed to it I can manage a cup, but usually I don't drink at all. Surely you and Mrs Pan knew that?'
'Ask anything else of me!' pleaded Moonbeam. 'But I wouldn't dare take it back - you know Mrs Pan's temper. If I tell her you don't drink, she'll never believe me; she'll say-I've failed in my duty.'
Reluctantly Xue Ke allowed her to leave the wine too. Moonbeam began to leave, but on reaching the doorway she took a quick look outside and glanced back at Xue Ke with a smile. Pointing in the direction of Xia Jin-gui's apartment she said:
'I think she might even come over herself to thank you for all you've done...
Xue Ke was not sure how to take this, and began to feel rather nervous.
'Please convey my thanks to Mrs Pan will you? The weather is cold, and she must be careful not to catch a chill. Besides she is my cousin s wife and there 5 no need for her to go to such lengths.'
Moonbeam said nothing but tittered and went on her way.
At first Xue Ke had been prepared to accept the offering as a genuine expression of gratitude on Jin-gul's part. But now Moonbeam's suggestive behaviour had aroused his suspicions, and he began to think there was something fishy going on.
'But surely Jin-gui would never think of such a thing?' he argued with himself. 'She *is* my sister-in-law.
Perhaps it's Moonbeam up to no good. She can't very well act on her own initiative. Maybe she is using Jin-gui as a cover. . . But then she's Pan's chamber-wife so that's hardly very...
Suddenly it occurred to him:
'Of course! Jin-gui's no lady! Sometimes when she's in the mood, she gets herself up like a regular harlot - she obviously fancies herself as some sort of man-killer! Another possibility is that she's fallen out with Bao-qin and this is a plot to disgrace me and drag the family name in the mud...
Xue Ke could not help finding all this rather daunting, and was racking his brains for some means of dealing with the situation, when to his great alarm he heard a splutter of laughter outside the window. But to discover who was laughing, you must turn to the next chapter.

CHAPTER 91

In the pursuance of lust,
Moonbeam evolves an artful strata gem
In a flight of Zen,
Bao-yu makes an enigmatic confession

We saw in our last chapter how Xue Ke was startled from his troubled reflections by a sudden splutter of laughter from outside his window.
'Moonbeam again! Or Jin-gui!' he thought to himself. 'I shall ignore them and see what happens.'

He listened for a while but there was no further sound. Not daring to touch the wine and sweetmeats, he closed the door and was about to undress when he heard a faint tap at the paper casement. He was already rattled by Moonbeam's behaviour and beginning to feel out of his depth. Hearing the tapping and yet unable to detect a presence outside the window, he didn't know what to think. He did up his gown again and sat down abstractedly by the lamp. He took a sweetmeat from the table and turned it over restlessly in his hand, studying it from every angle. Suddenly something made him look round. A small peephole (of the lick-and-spittle variety) had appeared in the window. Going across and putting his eye to the hole, he squinted through and received a blast of air in the face that quite startled the wits out of him. It was followed by another splutter of laughter. Rushing back, he blew out the. lamp and lay down in the darkness, holding his breath.
A voice came from outside:
'Are you going to sleep without trying the wine and sweetmeats?'
Xue Ke recognized it as Moonbeam's voice but said nothing and lay there pretending to be asleep.
A few seconds later, in a disgruntled tone:
'Miserable spoilsport! You don't know what you're missing!'
This time he could not identify the voice with any certainty. It sounded like Moonbeam, but there was something of Xia Jin-gui's expression in it too. Whoever it was, there was no longer any doubt in his mind as to their intentions. He tossed and turned for most of that night, and it was not until after five o'clock that he finally fell asleep.
Shortly after dawn someone knocked at the door.
'Who's there?' Xue Ke called out.
No answer. He got out of bed to open the door and saw Moonbeam, her hair combed simply back, wearing a tight little sleeveless jacket, its gold-striped neck-line cut in the shape of a guitar, its buttons seductively undone. She had a new-looking viridian scarf around her neck and instead of a skirt was sporting pomegranate-red linedpantaloons of a flowery design, and a pair of smart **red** embroided slippers. She had come before doing her morning toilet, to remove the sweetmeats before the rest of the household arose. Though rather taken aback to see her advancing into his room *en négligé'*, he asked politely:
'Why are you up so early this morning?'
Moonbeam blushed in reply, piled the sweetmeats onto one plate and went out holding it in both hands. Xue Ke interpreted this as pique at her failure ~o seduce him the previous evening.
'Oh well,' he thought to himself, 'it's too bad if I've annoyed them. At least they'll lose interest and leave me alone.'
He decided that he could forget about the whole business, and called for water to wash his face. It would be wise, he decided, to stay at home and take a couple pf days rest, for his own health and peace of mind, and also to avoid tile unwelcome attentions of Xue Pan's so-called friends, who seeing the Xue family deprived of its head and observing his own youth and inexperience, had caught the scent of money in the air. Some of them would have been content to act as messengers; some professed a knowledge of legal phraseology or claimed contacts behind the scenes and offered to deliver bribes to the officials and minions involved in the case; others advised him to make some money out of it for himself, while a few even tried scaring him with false rumours. Since he first encountered them, Xue Ke had done his utmost to avoid these unsavoury elements, but was aware that by openly rebuffing them he might create further trouble for himself. The only safe course, he concluded, was to lie low at home and await the confirmation of Pan's sentence.

To return to Xia Jin-gui. She had sent Moonbeam over on the previous night with the wine and sweetmeats in order to explore Xue Ke's susceptibility to her charms. When Moonbeam returned and described in detail what had happened, Jin-gui realized that she had miscalculated and that by pursuing such a strategy she would cause herself much pointless trouble and forfeit Moonbeam's respect. If she were to disguise her disappointment with a few words of feigned indifference, that would do nothing to relieve her own hankering after Xue Ke. Unable for the present to think of any other means of achieving her ends, she sat in moody silence.
She was unaware that Moonbeam had been thinking along exactly the same lines as herself. Moonbeam too reckoned that Xue Pan might not be back for some time and felt in dire need of a substitute. She had only been held back from procuring one by the fear of being caught at it by Jin-gui. Now that Jin-gui had made the first move, however, Moonbeam was only too glad to cruise along in her wake. She would step in first and become Xue Ke's mistress, and Jin-gui would have no choice but to accept the *fait accompli.*

Such was the reasoning behind her provocative behaviour.
Her first impression had been that the young master showed promise. True, he was not exactly leaping into her arms. She would have to play him slowly, which is precisely what she was doing when, to her intense disappointment, he blew out the lamp and went to bed. She reported back to Jin-gui, anxious to see what new course of action she might suggest. As nothing was forthcoming from her mistress however but this moody silence, she helped her prepare for the night and herself went to bed.
She had a sleepless night. As she lay tossing and turning, a new plan began to take shape in her mind. She would rise early and go to Xue Ke's apartment at once to collect the tray; she would slip on a couple of the more alluring items in her wardrobe, but otherwise not bother with her morning toilet, in order to look as sleepy and seductive as possible, straight from the boudoir... She would observe what effect this had on Xue Ke, while maintaining a show of annoyance and indifference towards him. This surely would be his chance to repent of his folly. She could help him aboard and pip Jin-gui at the post.
In the event Xue Ke the morning after proved as totally incorruptible as he had been the evening before, and Moonbeam found herself obliged to go through in earnest with her charade of walking out in a huff. She did however still keep her wits sufficiently about her to leave behind the wine-jug, as a pretext for one final manoeuvre.
'Did anyone see you when you fetched the things?'Jing-gui asked her on her return.
'Not a soul.'
'What about Master Ke? Did he have anything to say?'
'No.'
Jin-gui too had spent a sleepless night, without having thought of any alternative plan of campaign.
'If I am to go ahead with things,' she thought to herself, 'I can hardly hope to keep Moonbeam in the dark much longer. I shall have to bring her in on it. I'm sure she won t say anything then. Besides I need her to act as a go-between. I can't go myself. I'd better talk to her and see if we can't think of a good plan between us.'
She smiled at Moonbeam and asked:
'What do you make of Master Ke anyway?' 'He seems rather a fool.
Jin-gui laughed.
'How dare you insult one of the masters like that...'
Moonbeam laughed.
'He's asking for it, giving *you* the bird like that...
'And just what do you mean by that?'
'Oh, only the way he wouldn't touch any of the sweetmeats you sent of course... What else?'
She said this with a smirk and a meaningful look at Jin-gui, who replied:
'That's quite enough of your insinuations! I sent those things to thank him for all that he's done for Mr Pan, and I only asked you what had happened in case people had been gossiping. I have no idea what you are trying to suggest.'
'There's no need to worry, ma'am,' said Moonbeam coolly. 'I'm on your side, you can count on me. But we must be very discreet. It would be serious if word got around.'
Jin-gui felt her face burning.
'You little whore! So you've fallen for him have you, and think you can use me as a cover for your goings-on, is that it?'
'Think so if you like, ma'am. I was only trying to help. If you really fancy him, I think I have a plan.. "Every mouse will steal oil if he can." He's just scared of being found out, and wants to keep out of trouble. You must be patient, ma'am. Find as many little ways as you can of making yourself helpful. He is Mr Pan's younger cousin, after all, and doesn't have a wife. If you set your mind to it, I am sure you can get yourself into his good books, and no one will be able to say a word against you for it. In a few days he'll be ready to show *his* gratitude by paying you a return visit. You lay on a little party here -I'll help you get him drunk - and he's yours! If he won't play, we'll create a scene and accuse him of making a pass that should clinch it. He'll be too scared to say no then! If he still holds out, why then we'll know that he's just a sissy and not worth wasting time over anyway. What do you think?'
Jin-gui was puce in the face.
'Why you little strumpet! I can see you've had a few in your time! No wonder Pan couldn't let you out of his sight!'
Moonbeam pulled a face and laughed.
'Is that all the thanks I get for helping to bring the two of you together?'
From now on Jin-gui's only thought was the conquest of Xue Ke. And as she wished to accomplish this

without attracting attention, the Xue compound enjoyed a brief respite from its usual alarms and excursions.
Later that same day Moonbeam went to collect the wine-jug. She was as scrupulously well-behaved as she had been in the morning, and caused Xue Ke, who watched her out of the corner of his eye, a certain amount of remorse and self-doubt.
'Perhaps I was wrong,' he thought to himself. 'Perhaps I've been imagining the whole thing,. and they really meant well. In which case my ingratitude may have offended her and who knows what trouble this may lead to. And it will all have been my own fault...'
A couple of days went by and all was quiet. Whenever he saw Moonbeam, she lowered her head and walked away without so much as a glance in his direction. Jin-gui, on the other hand, pursued him with an eagerness that made him feel most uncomfortable. But of all this more later.

*

Aunt Xue and Bao-chai noticed how quiet Jin-gui had become all of a sudden, and how charming she was being to everyone. The change came as a great surprise, but nothing could have pleased Aunt Xue more, and she reasoned to herself about it thus:
'At the time of his marriage Pan must have crossed some unlucky star, which is what has caused all his subsequent misfortune. Thanks to our financial resources and the efforts of the Jias we have managed to avert disaster in this court-case, and perhaps this sudden change on Jin-gui's part is a sign that his luck has turned for the good...
It was in fact not far short of a miracle. One day after lunch Aunt Xue thought she would pay Jin-gui a visit, and set off supported by Prosper. She reached the courtyard in front of Jin-gui's apartment, when she heard a man S voice engaged in conversation with Jin-gui outside. Prosper called ahead diplomatically:
'Mrs Pan, Mrs Xue is here to see you!'
They were already in the doorway. As they advanced the figure of a man could be dimly seen escaping behind the door. Aunt Xue recoiled in alarm.
'Do please come in and sit down, Mother,' said Jin-gui. 'That's only my adopted brother Xia San. He's from the country and not used to company. This is the first time he has been here and he has never been introduced. He was intending to call on you to pay his respects.'
'If he is your brother, then I should be glad to meet him,' said Aunt Xue.
Jin-gui called her brother out from his hiding-place, and he made a bow and paid his respects. Aunt Xue replied politely and sat down.
'How long have you been in the capital?' she asked by way of conversation.
'I was only adopted into the family two months ago. Mother needed someone to look after household business. I arrived the day before yesterday, and came here today to see my new sister.
Aunt Xue could see that he was rather an uncouth sort of fellow, and did not like to stay long.
'I must be going,' she said. 'Don't get up.
Then turning to Jin-gui:
'As this is your brother's first visit, please invite him to stay for dinner.'
'Yes, Mother.'
Aunt Xue took her leave.
When she was out of the room, Jin-gui turned to Xia San.
'Sit down. I've kept our connection open and above board on purpose, so as to avoid suspicion from young Master Ke. I've some things I want you to buy for me in town, and I don't want anyone to know about them.'
'Of course, sis. Leave it to me. Give me the cash and I'll guarantee to deliver the goods.'
'Not so fast: you'd better be careful not to be swindled, or I might not accept delivery...
After a little more banter of this kind, Jin-gui had dinner with Xia San, after which she specified her commissions, gave him certain other instructions and he went on his way. From that day on he became a frequent visitor at Jin-gui's apartment. The old janitor usually let him through without going through the proper procedure of making an announcement, knowing him to be Mrs Pan's brother. His visits provided the wherewithal for many a plot. But we anticipate.

One day a letter arrived from Xue Pan. Aunt Xue opened it and sent for Bao-chai to read it to her. This is what it said:
'Dear Mother,

I am being reasonably treated here in prison, so please set your mind at rest. I had some bad news yesterday however, from the clerk of the court. My sentence was approved at the prefectural level - I presume the family had been in touch with the prefect. But when the case
came up before the circuit court, the Taotai rejected the judgement. The secretary here at the yamen has been very helpful and has sent an immediate petition in defence of the original judgement. But the Taotai has issued an official statement reprimanding the local mandarin for malpractice. He wants .me to appear before the circuit court. If I do, I could be in trouble again. We can't have approached the Taotai yet. Please send someone to do this as soon as my letter reaches you. And send Cousin Ke here at once. Any delay may result in my being sent under escort to the circuit court. On no account stint the money! *Extremely urgent!'*

This sent Aunt Xue into floods of tears. Bao-chai and Xue Ke did their best to calm her down, while at the same time impressing upon her the need to act swiftly. Once again she was obliged to part with her nephew - bags were packed, money weighed out, and Xue Ke prepared to set off that same night with one of the family shop-assistants. It was a night of feverish activity, and Bao-chai herself stayed up till the early hours, helping and making sure that nothing was overlooked by the servants. The combination of nervous strain and physical exhaustion proved too much for a girl of her gentle nature and refined upbringing, and the next morning she went down with a fever and was unable to swallow water or medicine.

Oriole reported this at once to Aunt Xue, who came hurrying over. Finding Bao-chai unable to speak, her face bright **red,** her body burning hot to the touch, she immediately panicked and burst into tears. Bao-qin tried to comfort and support her aunt, while Caltrop was so affected by Bao-chai's appearance that she could only stand by the bedside calling her name and weeping. Baochai was too weak to speak or move her hands. Her eyes were dry, her nose blocked. They sent for the doctor, whose prescription gradually brought her round and to the family's intense relief the immediate crisis seemed to have been averted. The news had already reached the various inner apartments of the Rong-guo and Ning-guo mansions, and a maid soon arrived from Xi-feng's with one of her Ten Fragrances Revivifying Pills, followed by a maid with one of Lady Wang's Most Precious Pills. Grandmother Jia, Lady Xing, Lady Wang and all the ladies from both mansions including You-shi all sent maids to inquire how she was getting on, but all agreed that her illness should be kept a secret from Bao-yu. She went on taking various remedies for seven or eight days with no real improvement; it was only when she remembered her own Cold Fragrance Pills and took three of these that she began to recover. By the time Bao-yu learnt of her illness, she was already better and he did not go to visit her.

A letter arrived from Xue Ke, which Aunt Xue did not show to Bao-chai, for fear of upsetting her. She read it herself and went straight to Lady Wang to beg for her help, at the same time giving her an account of Bao-chai's condition. After Aunt Xue had gone to bed, Lady Wang went in to plead with Jia Zheng.

'With the higher-ranking officials a word is usually sufficient; but these provincials clearly need a more tangible incentive,' he said somewhat grimly. 'We shall have to dip into our pockets.'

Lady Wang went on to talk of Bao-chai:

'The poor girl! I feel responsible for her: she is almost one of the family. The sooner she and Bao-yu are married the better. It is ruining her health the way things are.'

'1 agree,' replied Jia Zheng. 'But her family are very disorganized at present. And besides, it is midwinter. New Year will soon be upon us, and we shall all be busy putting our affairs in order. 1 propose the following timetable: the betrothal can take place sometime during the winter; early next year they can exchange presents; and the ceremony itself should be fixed for sometime after Mother's birthday. I should like you to put this to your sister.

'I will,' replied Lady Wang.

The next day she told Aunt Xue, who thought the proposal a good one. After lunch the two of them went to see Grandmother Jia.

'Have you just come over, my dear?' inquired Grandmother Jia of Aunt Xue, after the usual courtesies had been exchanged.

'No, I was here yesterday,' replied Aunt Xue. 'But as it was rather late, I was not able to come and pay my respects.'

Lady Wang repeated Jia Zheng's proposal to Grandmother Jia, who seemed very happy with it. While they were talking, Bao-yu came into the room.

'Have you had your lunch yet?' asked his grandmother.

'I've been home for lunch,' he replied, 'and now I'm on my way back to school. I called in. to see you, Grannie, and also I heard that Aunt Xue was here and wanted to pay my respects.'

Turning to Aunt Xue he continued:

‘Is Cousin Chai quite better now?’
Aunt Xue smiled.
‘Yes she is.’
Bao-yu noticed that his arrival had caused a sudden lull in the conversation. After sitting with them for a few minutes, he also noticed that Aunt Xue was not being as affectionate towards him as usual, and mused to himself:
‘Even if she’s not in a good mood, I don’t see why they have to stop talking to me altogether...
He set off for school greatly perplexed by what had happened.
That evening on his return he paid his usual evening calls and made his way to the Naiad’s House. Lifting the door-curtain, he went in and was received by Nightingale. Seeing that there was no one in the inner room, he asked Nightingale where Dai-yu had gone, and was informed that she had gone to call on Grandmother Jia.
‘Miss Lin heard that Mrs Xue was there,’ said Nightingale, ‘and wanted to pay her respects. Haven’t you been there this evening, Master Bao?’
‘Yes, I’ve just come from there, but I didn’t see Miss Lin.’
‘Wasn’t she there?’
‘No. Where could she have gone?’
‘I’m not sure.’
Bao-yu was about to set off again when he caught sight of the graceful figure of Dai-yu walking slowly towards the door with Snowgoose.
‘You’re back, coz!’ he exclaimed, stepping aside to let her pass, and then following her inside. She walked into the inner room.
‘Do come in and sit down,’ she said to Bao-yu. Nightingale fetched another jacket and helped her into it. She sat down and asked him:
‘Did you see Mrs Xue at Grandmother’s?’
‘Yes, I did,’ replied Bao-yu.
‘Did she mention me at all?’
‘No. And she didn’t seem as friendly as usual towards me either. When I asked after Cousin Chai she just smiled and hardly said anything. I hope I haven’t offended her by not going over to visit Chai this last couple of days.’
Dai-yu gave a short laugh.
‘Have you been to see her?’
‘I didn’t know she was ill at first,’ protested Bao-yu, ‘I only heard a day or two ago, and I still haven’t been...’
‘Well that’s certain to be the reason...
‘The truth is that neither Grandmother, Mother nor Father would let me go, and how could I without their permission? I used to be able to drop round and see her ten times a day if I felt like it; but now they’ve closed the little side-gate and I have to go round by the front, which is such a performance.’
‘But how’s she supposed to know all that?’
‘You know Chai: she’s sure to make allowances for me.’
‘You shouldn’t take it for granted,’ retorted Dai-yu.’Perhaps she won’t. It’s not as if it’s her mother who’s been ill: it’s Chai herself. Think of all the poetry contests, all the pleasures you’ve shared with her in the past - the flowers, the wine, the parties. Now she’s separated from us, and you know the troubles her family are having, yet when she falls seriously ill you behave with complete indifference. She’s bound to be offended.’
Bao-yu: ‘Surely you don’t mean she doesn’t like me any more?’
Dai-yu: ‘I have no idea. I can only surmise how she might reasonably be expected to feel.’
Bao-yu stared in silence. Dai-yu ignored him, told one of her maids to put some more incense on the brazier, took out a book and began reading it. After a minute or two Bao-yu frowned and stamped his foot fretfully.
‘What’s the point in my being alive? The world would be an altogether better place without this thing called me
‘Can’t you see?’ said Dai-yu. ‘It’s the illusion of "me" that creates the illusion of "others", and a life lived under these twin illusions is bound to be beset with frustrations, fears, confusion, foolish dreams and a host of other obstacles and entanglements. I wasn’t speaking in earnest earlier on. Mrs Xue was just in low spirits when you saw her. There was no need for you to bring Cousin Chai into it. Mrs Xue came over because of Cousin Pan’s court-case. She was worried, and it’s hardly surprising she wasn’t in the mood to

entertain you. You just allowed your imagination to run away with you and lead you astray.'
Her words brought Bao-yu a sudden sense of enlightenment.
'Of course!' he exclaimed with a laugh. 'That's exactly it! You're so much more perceptive than I am! No wonder you defeated me with that koan last year, when I was so wrought up. For all my pretensions, I need you to guide me to the truth. This bumptious Buddha bows to your Single Flower!'
'In that case,' said Dai-yu, seeing her opportunity, 'prepare yourself for another inquisition.'
Bao-yu crossed his legs, brought the palms of his hands together, closed his eyes, pursed his lips and said: 'Pray begin.'
Dai-yu: 'Now, let the First of my Propositions be that Cousin Chai likes you. Proposition the Second: she likes you not. The Third: she liked you a few days ago, but does no more. The Fourth: she does today, but will not do tomorrow. The Fifth: you like her, but she likes you not. The Sixth and last: she likes you, btit you like her not. Consider these Six Propositions well.'
For several minutes Bao-yu was completely silent. Then suddenly he burst out laughing and cried:
'If all the Seas of Paradise were mine, with my simple gourd I'd be content.'
Dai-yu: 'What if your gourd is carried away by the stream?'
Bao-yu: 'Never! Wherever the stream flows, the gourd will always hold its own course.'
Dai-yu: 'What if the flow comes to an end and your Pearl sinks?'
Bao-yu: "'Like a catkin held fast in a puddle,
This Zen Mind:
Not a partridge, gaily cavorting
In the spring wind."'
Dai-yu: 'The first rule of Zen is not to tell lies.'
Bao-yu: 'But it's the truth, so help me Buddha, the Dharma and the Holy Brotherhood.'
Dai-yu lowered her head in silence. She heard a 'cawcaw' outside the window, and a crow flew up into the sky, wheeling towards the south-east.
Bao-yu: 'What sort of an omen is that?'
Dai-yu: 'Our fates cannot be learned from the cries of birds.'
Before Bao-yu could think of a reply, Ripple came into the room and said: 'Master Bao, please hurry! The Master sent someone to the Garden to ask if you were home from school yet, Aroma said you were, so you'd better be quick!"
Bao-yu jumped to his feet and hurried out in alarm. Dai-yu did not try to detain him. For the outcome, please read the next chapter.

CHAPTER 92

Qiao-jie studies the Lives of Noble Women
and shows a precocious enthusiasm for Virtue
Jia Zheng admires a Mother Pearl
and reflects on the vicissitudes of Life

'What does Father want me for?' asked Bao-yu in some alarm, as they left the Naiad's House. Ripple smiled.
'He doesn't. Aroma told me to fetch you, and I was afraid you wouldn't come, so I made it up...'
Bao-yu was greatly relieved.
'I would have come. There's really no need to scare me like that.'
He arrived hack at **Green** Delights, to be interrogated by Aroma:
'Where have you been all this time?'
'At Miss Lin's. I got delayed. We were chatting about Aunt Xue and Cousin Chai's illness.'
'What were you saying?' asked Aroma inquisitively.
Bao-yu described his Zen dialogue with Dai-yu.
'You two are so silly,' was Aroma's comment. 'Why can't you have a normal conversation about ordinary things, or discuss something nice like poetry? What do you have to go talking about Zen for? You're not a monk!'
'You don't understand,' replied Bao-yu. 'We have our Zen secrets. No one else could join in our conversations.'

‘I dare say,’ returned Aroma, with a scornful sniff. ‘I’m sure that if you two went on Zennifying at each other till you were both **blue** in the face, we should still be standing here quite as much in the dark as ever.’

‘When I was younger,’ said Bao-yu, ignoring her jibes, ‘and Dai-yu was rather more childish in her ways, somehow I always managed to upset her by saying the wrong thing. Nowadays I think more about what I say, and she takes offence less easily. But all the same I have noticed that when we meet, which is not very often, as she seldom visits me and I have to spend so much time studying, we almost seem to have grown apart in some way.

‘I should hope so too,’ said Aroma. ‘Now that the two of you are older, of course you must learn to be more discreet.’

Bao-yu nodded his head irritably.

‘I know - let’s not talk any more about that now. What I want to know is, has anyone come over from Grandmother’s with a message?’

‘No.’

‘Then she must have forgotten!’ said Bao-Vu. ‘Tomorrow’s the First of the Eleventh, isn’t it? Every year Grannie has a party and invites the whole family over to celebrate the beginning of the Lessening Cold season, when the days .~tart to get longer. I’ve already asked for the day off school, iii fact. What am I to do? Should I go to school or not? If I do, that will be my day-off wasted. If I don’t, and Father finds out, he’ll scold me for playing truant.’

‘I think you should go,’ replied Aroma. ‘You’ve lust started to make progress with your studies, and this is no time to be thinking of letting up. You should be working as hard as you can. Only yesterday I heard Her Ladyship say how well young Lan is doing at his studies. When he gets back from school lie settles straight down to his texts and compositions all on his own, and never goes to bed till the small hours. You’re his uncle, and several years older than him. If you let him overtake you Her Old Ladyship will be very displeased. So I say, off to school early in the morning.’

Musk did not agree, however.

‘In this cold weather?’ she objected. ‘lf you go now, they’ll wonder why you asked for the day off in the first place. It will look as though you were inventing an excuse to get off school. I think you should make the most of it

and have a day’s rest. If Her Old Ladyship has forgotten to have a party, we can always have one here instead...’

‘Now he’ll never go, and it will all be your fault,’ complained Aroma.

‘I believe in taking each day as it comes and having fun whenever you can,’ said Musk defiantly. ‘I don’t believe in sucking up to people and working myself to death for a two-tael bonus every month like you do, Aroma dear...’

Aroma spat at her:

‘You little hussy! Interfering in a serious discussion in such a silly manner...

‘On the contrary, I was saying it for your sake, dear...

‘For my sake?’

‘Yes. As soon as Master Bao’s gone to school, you’ll sit around mooning and moaning again, longing for him to come home and bring the sunshine back into your life. Don’t think you can fool me with that holier-than-thou attitude of yours...

Aroma was on the point of giving Musk a large piece of her mind when one of Grandmother Jia’s maids arrived and said:

‘Her Old Ladyship says Master Bao’s not to go to school tomorrow. Mrs Xue’s been invited round to spend the day, and all the young ladies will probably be coming too. Miss Shi, Miss Xing and Mrs Zhu’s cousins have all been invited. It’s to celebrate the "lessening cold" or some such thing...

‘I told you so!’ cried Bao-yu with glee before she could finish. ‘It’s always been one of Grannie’s favourite occasions. Now I can have the day off *and* a clear conscience!’

Aroma said nothing, and Grandmother Jia’s maid returned.

Bao-yu’s recent stint of self-application had in fact left him more or less gasping for a respite of this sort. He was also delighted to hear that Aunt Xue was coming, as that would surely mean a chance to see Bao-chai.

‘Let’s have an early night,’ he said. ‘I want to be up first thing tomorrow.’

The night passed uneventfully, and early next morning, true to his resolution, Bao-yu went to pay his respects to Grandmother Jia and then to his father and mother, to whom he reported that ‘Grannie had given him the day off school’. Jia Zheng raised no objection and Bao-yu withdrew from his presence at a

snail's pace, waiting till he was a few yards from the study before breaking into a run and racing to Grandmother Jia's apartment. The other guests had not yet arrived, but he saw a nurse and a few younger maids enter the room with Xi-feng's little girl Qiao-jie, who walked up to her great-grandmother, paid her respects and said:
'Mama told me to come and say my good-morning and sit with you first, Great-grannie. She says she'll be here by and by.'
The old lady laughed.
'Bless you child! Here I've been sitting since cockcrow, and none of my guests has turned up, except your Uncle Bao.'
Qiao-jie's nurse did some discreet prompting:
'Say good morning to your uncle, Miss.'
Qiao-jie did so, and Bao-yu returned the greeting.
'My Mama wants to see you, Uncle Bao,' said Qiao-jie. 'She said so yesterday.'
'What about?' asked Bao-yu.
'She says she wants to find out if I've learnt my characters properly after all my lessons with Nannie Li. I promised her I had and offered to read them out for her. But she thought I was guessing and didn't believe me. She said I couldn't have learnt them because all I do all day long is play. But I don't think learning characters is hard. I can even read my *Girl's Classic of Filial Piety* - it's ever so easy. Mama thinks I'm making it up, so she wants you to go over it with me when you've got the time.'
Grandmother Jia laughed.
'Bless you darling! Your mother can't read a word, that's why she couldn't tell if you were cheating her or not. Tomorrow your uncle Bao will go over it with you, and she can listen in. Then she'll have to believe you.'
'Hbw many characters do you know by now?' asked Bao-yu.
'Over three thousand,' replied Qiao-jie. 'I've finished the *Girl's Classic*, and a fortnight ago I started on *Lives of Noble Women Present and Past.*'
'Do you understand it all?' asked Bao-yu. 'If there's anything you're not clear about, you must tell me and I'll try and explain it for you.
'What a nice idea,' commented Grandmother Jia. 'As her uncle, you should help her with her studies.'
Bao-yu cleared his throat.
'Let us leave aside,' he began, 'such household names as the worthy queen and consorts of Good King Wen, and pass on to those two other Models of Queenly Capability:

> Queen Jiang, who in order to rebuke her sovereign for his excessive attentions removed all her ornaments and stood like a prisoner awaiting sentence; and the Lady Hunchback of Wu-yan, whose earnest remonstrations restored order in the kingdom of Qi.'

'Yes,' said Qiao-jie, and Bao-yu went on:
'For Talent, we have the lady-historian Ban Zhao, Ban Jie-yu literary concubine of Emperor Cheng-di of Han, and the two poetesses Cai Wen-ji and Xie Dao-yun.'
'What about Paragons of Virtue?' asked Qiao-jie.
'Now let me see,' replied Bao-yu, 'for Virtue we have Meng Guang, the wife who wore a wooden hairpin and cotton skirts; we have Bao Xuan's wife, who drew her own water from the well, and Tao Kan's mother, who cut off her hair to buy wine for her son's guests. Their Virtue lay in their Acceptance of Poverty.'
Qiao-jie nodded her head enthusiastically.
'Then we have the famous cases of Hardship Endured,' continued Bao-yu. 'Princess Le-chang, who after a cruel separation was reunited with her husband by the stratagem of the broken mirror; and Su Hui, who embroidered a lengthy palindrome to send to her husband exiled in the wastes of Tartary. Then come the Paragons of Filial Piety: Mu Lan marching to war in her ailing father's place, Cao E throwing herself into the river after a fruitless search for her father's corpse - and many others besides...'
Qiao-jie had become very quiet and thoughtful, and when Bao-yu went on to recount the tale of Lady Cao who after her husband's death cut off her nose to deter any further suitors, and other tales of Widowed Virtue, her little face became more serious than ever. Thinking this might all be making her feel uncomfortable, Bao-yu introduced an apocryphal category of his own invention:
'Then of course we have the Famous Beauties, romantic ladies such as Wang Zhao-jun, Xi-shi, Cherry Lips, Willow Waist, **Crimson** Fairy, Zhuo Wen-jun, **Red** Duster -all of these were...
'Enough!' interrupted Grandmother Jia, seeing the blank look on Qiao-jie's face. 'No more! You've filled the poor child's head to overflowing. How can she possibly remember all those names?'

‘I recognize *some* of the names Uncle Bao mentioned,’ said Qiao-jie. ‘And his talk has certainly helped me to understand the ones I know.’
‘I don’t think we need bother going over the written characters for all those names,’ said Bao-yu. ‘I’m sure you know them.’
‘Mama said that our **Crimson** used to be one of your maids,’ said Qiao-jie out of the **blue**. ‘And she says she still hasn’t found you anyone to replace her. She’s thinking of giving you Mrs Liu’s daughter, Fivey I think her name is, if you’re happy about it...’
Bao-yu was delighted to hear this and said with a grin:
‘Your mother doesn’t have to ask me about things like that. She makes all the decisions.’
He turned with a smile to Grandmother Jia.
‘My young niece shows every sign of growing up to be a second Cousin Feng. Only I think she may be even cleverer, and will have the added advantage of being able to read.’
‘I’ve no objection to girls learning their letters,’ commented Grandmother Jia. ‘But needlework must always come first.’
‘Nannie Liu teaches me embroidery,’ said Qiao-jie. ‘I can do flowers and chain-patterns. I’m not very good yet, but I’m learning.’
‘In a family like ours,’ said Grandmother J ia, ‘we never *need* to do our own sewing, I know. But it’s as well to know how. Then you will never be at the mercy of others.’
‘Yes, Great-grannie,’ Qiao-jie smilingly replied. She would have welcomed some more Paragons of Virtue, but thought Bao-yu looked a little preoccupied and did not venture to ask.
What was preoccupying Bao-yu? The answer lies in Qiao-jie’s mention of Fivey. This attractive girl had been originally designated for **Green** Delights, but one obstacle after another had so far prevented her from entering service there. First it had been illness; then they had been wary of choosing a good-looking maid for Bao-yu in the puritanical phase that followed on Lady Wang’s expulsion of Skybright. A further opportunity of seeing her had presented itself when she and her mother had arrived with gifts during his secret visit to Skybright at her cousin’s house - and his earlier favourable impression of her had been confirmed. She really was extremely pretty. What marvellous luck that Xi-feng should have remembered her now, and was arranging for her to take Crimson’s place!
While Bao-yu was day-dreaming, Grandmother Jia was becoming more and more impatient at the lateness of her guests and sent word to hurry them along. A few minutes later the first contingent arrived: Li Wan and her two cousins Wen and Qi, Tan-chun, Xi-chun, Shi Xiang-yun and Lin Dai-yu. They all paid their respects to Grandmother Jia and greeted one another. Aunt Xue had still not come, and Grandmother Jia sent for her. Finally she arrived, accompanied by Bao~q in. Bao-yu paid his respects, and said hello to Bao-qm, wondering why it was that neither Bao-chai nor Xing Xiu-yan had come. When Dai-yu asked outright, ‘Why couldn’t Cousin Chai come today?’, Aunt Xue pretended that she was not feeling well. Xiu-yan had stayed away because she knew that Aunt Xue (her future mother-in-law) would be there. Bao-chai’s absence caused a momentary depression in Bao-yu’s spirits, which was however soon dispelled by the presence of Dai-yu.
Lady Xing and Lady Wang arrived shortly afterwards. Xi-feng, who heard that they were there before her and was embarrassed at the thought of being late, sent Patience ahead to apologize for her.
‘Mrs Lian was meaning to come, but she has had a bit of a fever and won’t be coming till later,’ said Patience.
‘If she’s not feeling well, she needn’t bother to come at all,’ said Grandmother Jia. ‘We ought to start our lunch now.
The maids moved the charcoal brazier to the back of the room and placed two tables in front of Grandmother Jia’s couch, at which the party now arranged itself for lunch. After lunch they sat once more round the brazier chatting pleasantly, and there for the present we must leave them.
*

What was really detaining Xi-feng? It had at first been no more than her embarrassment at being later than Ladies Xing and Wang. But this had been further complicated by the arrival of Brightie’s wife, who informed her that one of Ying-chun’s women-servants had come to pay her respects. The woman had come straight to Xi-feng’s apartment and had not notified the main mansion of her presence. Xi-feng was puzzled, and summoned her into the room.

‘Is your mistress well?’ she asked.
‘Anything but well,’ replied the woman. ‘But that’s not what I’ve come about, ma’am. Really it was Chess’s mother who begged me to come and ask you for a favour.’

‘But Chess has been dismissed,’ said Xi-feng. ‘What have her affairs to do with me now?’
‘It’s a long story, ma’am. From the day she was dismissed Chess did nothing but cry her heart out. Then one day that cousin of hers, her boy-friend Pan You-an, turned up again. Her mother was terribly rude to him when she saw him, swearing that he’d been her daughter’s ruin. She took hold of him and tried to hit him, while he stood there meek and mild not saying a word. Chess heard what was going on and came rushing out and cried defiantly: "It was because of him I was dismissed - I don’t need reminding! I know he acted wrong! But now that he’s come back, why start hitting him? You may as well strangle me instead..." "You shameless slut!" cries the m6ther, "what do you want then?" "A girl can only marry once," replies Chess defiantly. "It was my mistake, I let him take me, and right or wrong I’m his now and no one else shall have me. If he could only have shown a little more courage then and stood by me instead of running away! But I’d wait for him now even if I had to die waiting. I’d rather die than let you marry me to someone else. Now that he’s here, ask him if he’ll take me for his wife. If he still wants me, I’ll make you my farewell kotow and you can forget that I ever existed. I’ll follow him to the ends of the earth. I’ll beg in the streets if need be!" This put her mother in a terrible rage. Weeping and cursing she cried: "You’re my daughter and if I say you can’t marry him then you can’t, and that’s that!" But Chess was an obstinate creature. No sooner had her mother said this than she took a run at the wall and dashed her head against it. She split her skull open, the blood came pouring out and in a moment she was dead! Her mother began howling, but it was too late. Next she started screaming at him that he’d have to pay with his life. He replied - and this is the strangest part of the story -"Don’t worry. I’m a wealthy man now. I never forgot your daughter, and came back today to find her. I have always been true to her. To prove that I’m telling no lie. . ." As he said this he brought out a casket from inside his gown, full of gold and precious stones. One look at them and Chess’s mother changed her tune. "Why oh why didn’t you say all this earlier?" she asked. "I know the ways of women," he replied, "how easily swayed they are by the idea of wealth. Now at least I know for sure that she was a girl in a million. These are ours," he added, handing her the casket. "I will go and buy the coffin now, and see to it that she is buried properly." The mother took the casket and left all the arrangements to her nephew. She seemed to have quite forgotten about Chess. When he returned, she saw to her astonishment that the bearers he had employed were bringing not one but two coffins. She asked him what he needed two coffins for, and he replied with a strange laugh that one would not be enough. He showed not the least sign of crying, and the mother decided his mind must have been deranged by the shock of his grief. For a while he was busy preparing Chess’s corpse, dry-eyed and silent, when all of a sudden before anyone had time to take in what was happening he pulled out a knife and slit his throat and that was the end of him. The mother realized too late what a terrible thing she had done, and broke down in floods of tears. The whole neighbourhood knows, and they want to report the case to the magistrate. In her distress she begged me to ask you to use your influence to help her, ma’am, and said she would come herself and kotow to you in gratitude.’
‘What a story!’ exclaimed Xi-feng, aghast at this recital. ‘That fate should have brought two such examples of folly together! Now I understand that look of calm indifference on her face when she was caught during the search of the Garden. What a determined young thing she must have been at heart. I don’t really have time to meddle in such things, but your story has touched my heart! Tell her mother that I will speak to Mr Lian and send Brightie to sort the thing out for her.’
Xi-feng sent the woman on her way and herself departed to join the gathering at Grandmother Jia’s.

One day, Jia Zheng was engrossed in a game of Go with one of his literary gentlemen, Zhan Guang. It had been quite a level game, and the outcome now hung on a *ko* that was in progress on one corner of the board. As they were playing, a page from the gate came in to report that Mr Feng had arrived and was waiting outside to see Sir Zheng.

‘See him in,’ instructed Jia Zheng.
The page did as bidden and Feng Zi-ying was shortly to be observed walking in through the inner gateway. Jia Zheng hurried out to receive him and conducted him through to the study. As he sat down, Feng noticed that they were playing Go.
‘Please carry on with your game,’ he said. ‘I shall be very happy to watch.’
‘My poor play is hardly a worthy spectacle for so distinguished an observer,’ protested Zhan Guang with an obsequious smile.
‘You are too modest,’ said Feng. ‘Carry on please.’
‘What brings you here today?’ inquired Jia Zheng.
‘Oh, nothing of any importance,’ replied Feng. ‘Carry on, sir. I shall benefit greatly from watching your

play.'
Jia Zheng turned to his partner.
'As Feng is an old friend and has not come on any pressing business, we may as well finish our game first. He can sit and watch.'
'Are you playing for stakes?' asked Feng.
'We are,' replied Zhan Guang.
'Then silence! On with the game!'
'I don't think we need be too strict about that,' said Jia Zheng. 'I may be a dozen taels up by the end, but I doubt very much if I shall see the colour of my money. I think friend Zhan will have to stand us a few drinks instead.'
'An excellent idea,' said Zhan with a laugh.
'Are you and friend Zhan on a par, sir?' inquired Feng.
Jia Zheng laughed.
'We used to play level, but he always lost, so I gave him a handicap of two. He still loses. And the trouble is, he thinks he can take his moves back all the time, and gets quite upset when I wave the rules at him.'
Zhan laughed.
'You exaggerate, Sir Zheng...'
'Well, we shall see...
On this note of light-hearted banter, they continued their game. When it was finished and they counted up the pieces, Zhan was seven down.
'It all depended on that last *ko,*' commented Feng. 'You gained the advantage, sir, because you were less vulnerable to a *ko* threat.'
Jia Zheng turned to Feng.
'Please forgive us. How are you keeping?'
'It has been a long while since we last met,' said Feng. 'My visit today is partly of a social nature, and partly occasioned by the presence in the capital of a deputy-prefect from Kwangsi province, who is here for an audience with His Majesty and has brought with him four curios, some of them imported, that would make excellent palace-offerings. The first is a folding screen of twenty-four panels, carved of pure blackwood. Though the stone used for the carved inlay - landscapes, figures, buildings, birds and flowers - is not jade, it is a high quality serpentine. Each panel has a palace scene, with fifty or sixty palace-ladies. It is called "Spring Morning in the Han Palace". The features, gestures and costumes are rendered with great clarity. The finish is quite exquisite, the detail and composition of the highest order. It would be perfect for the main hall of Prospect Garden, sir. The second item is a large wall-clock over three feet high. This is a most unusual item. It has a little figure of a boy on the face that indicates the hour with a pointer, and inside it has a little mechanical orchestra. Those two heavier articles I was not able to bring with me. I have however brought the other two, which I think you will find quite fascinating.'
Feng produced an embroidered casket wrapped in several layers of white damask-silk. Unwrapping it, he raised the lid, removed the protective pad of silk-wool beneath it and displayed its contents. In the top compartment of the casket lay a little glass container with a fitted lid. In this container, on a piece of **crimson** silk that lined its inner casing of gold, lay a magnificent lustrous pearl, as large as a longan.
'This,' announced Feng, 'is known as a Mother Pearl.'
He asked for a tray and Zhang Guang handed him a teatray of black lacquer, asking:
'Will this do?'
'Perfectly,' replied Feng, taking from the inner pocket of his gown a white silk bundle. This too contained pearls, of an ordinary size, which he tipped out onto the tray. He then placed the 'Mother Pearl' in their midst and put the tray down on the table. Like so many perfect drops of water the smaller pearls rolled across the tray towards the large central pearl. And when Feng lifted the 'Mother', all the little ones clung to her. Not a single one was left on the tray.
'Amazing!' exclaimed Zhan Guang.
'An interesting phenomenon,' observed Jia Zheng. 'And most appropriately named.'
'Where is the other casket?' asked Feng turning to his page, who promptly came forward with a rosewood casket held aloft in both hands. The three men gathered round as it was opened. On its lining of tiger-brocade lay a length of **blue** gauze-like material, many times folded.
'And what is this?' asked Zhan Guang.
'This,' replied Feng, 'is called Byssus Net.'
He took it from the casket and laid it on the table. Folded as it was, it occupied a space no more than five inches long and less than half an inch thick. Feng began to unfold it. When he had done so a dozen times, it

extended over the edge of the table.
'There are still two folds to come,' he explained. 'To unfold it to its full extent we would need to hang it in a room with a high ceiling. This fabric is woven from the Byssus, the so-called Mermaid's Tears. In extreme heat it would make a perfect fly and mosquito-net for use in a large reception hall. As you can see, it is extremely light and transparent.'
'Please do not unfold it fully,' said Jia Zheng. 'It might prove hard to fold again.'
Feng and Zhan Guang carefully folded the net and replaced it in its casket.
'The price being asked for these four curios is really very reasonable,' said Feng. 'I think he would be willing to part with the four for twenty thousand taels. Ten thousand for the Mother Pearl, five thousand for the Byssus Net and two thousand five hundred each for the screen and striking clock.'
'We. could not possibly buy them, I'm afraid,' said Jia Zheng.
'But with your connections in the palace,' said Feng, 'surely they would make an ideal ~
'I dare say they would,' replied Jia Zheng. 'I dare say all sorts of things would. But we simply haven't the money. I would like Lady Jia to see them, all the same.'
'By all means.'
Jia Zheng sent a page to fetch Jia Lian, who was instructed to take the pearl and the precious net through to Grandmother Jia's apartment. He also sent a servant to invite Lady Xing, Lady Wang and Xi-feng to come and view them.
'There are two other items,' Jia Lian explained to the ladies. 'A folding screen and a musical clock. The whole lot is going for twenty thousand taels.'
'What!' said Xi-feng sharply. 'I grant you they're fine pieces. Hut we definitely haven't the cash to spare. Besides we're not like provincial viceroys and governors, who are expected to make such offerings. No; over the years I've come to the conclusion that the most sensible way to secure our financial future is to invest in land and property-trust-land for provision of sacrificial funds, and free burial-grounds for the clan with permanent caretakers' quarters. Such things would be there for the family to fall back on in hard times, an insurance against ruin. I don't know if Grannie, Father and Mother agree with me or not? Of course, if Sir Zheng and Father want to buy these things, it's entirely their decision.'
Grandmother Jia led the chorus in Xi-feng's support.
'You're absolutely right, my dear.'
'Give them back to me then,' said Jia Lian grumpily. 'Sir Zheng only sent me to show them to Grandmother as a possible palace-offering. No one said anything about buying them for ourselves. Trust you to pour cold water on the whole idea before Grandmother has even had a chance to speak!'
Jia Lian returned to the study with the curios, and reported that Grandmother Jia did not wish to buy them.
'No one denies their quality,' he said to Feng Zi-ying. 'But we just can't afford them. I'll keep my eyes open though, and if I come across a likely buyer I'll definitely let you know.'
Feng packed them away again, evidently disappointed. He sat and chatted for a while without much enthusiasm, and soon made motions of leaving.
'Won't you stay to dinner?' asked Jia Zheng.
'I have already taken up too much of your time...'
'Not at all. We should be delighted.'
As they were speaking Jia She was announced. He was already in the room, and after greeting Feng engaged him in conversation for a few minutes. Presently wine was served and various delicacies were set on the table. After the fourth or fifth round of wine, the subject of the curios came up again.
'Actually it's rather hard to sell stuff like this,' confessed Feng. 'The market is restricted to the few illustrious families such as yours.
'Oh come, I am sure you will find someone,' Jia Zheng consoled him.
'Besides,' observed Jia She in a rather maudlin tone, 'we are not exactly the great and glorious house we once were, you know. Nothing but a hollow facade...'
'How is Mr Zhen over at Ning-guo House by the way?' asked Feng. 'I saw him the other day and in the course of conversation he mentioned this new wife of his son's. Not a patch on his first, so he was saying. Who is she anyway? I never did ask her name.'
'She's a Hu-they're an old local family. Her father was once Taotai of the Metropolitan Circuit,' Jia Zheng informed him.
'Oh, I know Intendant Hu....' said Feng. 'Heard that he lets some pretty rum things go on in his house too. Still, the main thing is that the gal should have turned out all right.'
'I heard from someone at the Grand Secretariat that Yu-cun is to be promoted again,' put in Jia Lian.
'Really?. I'm glad to hear that,' said Jia Zheng. 'Has it been made official yet?'

‘Most probably,’ said Jia Lian.
‘Yes, I heard the same myself when I was at the Board of Civil Office earlier today,’ said Feng. ‘Am I right in thinking that he is a relation of yours, sir?’
‘He is,’ answered Jia Zheng.
‘A close one?’
‘It is a long story,’ said Jia Zheng. ‘He comes originally from Hu-zhou in Chekiang. He left home and was lodging in Soochow, eking out a rather unsatisfactory existence, when he was befriended by a gentleman named Zhen Shi-yin, who provided the means or him to better himself. Yu-cun later went on to become a palace graduate, and passed out with flying colours and an immediate posting as a magistrate in one of the provinces. He took one of this benefactor’s maidservants as his concubine; she is now, I believe, his principal wife. Old Zhen himself was reduced to destitution by a strange series of calamities, and finally disappeared without trace.’
‘We only came to know Yu-cun,’ continued Jia Zheng, ‘when my brother-in-law, Lin Ru-hai, who at that time was the Yangchow Salt Commissioner, engaged him as private tutor for his daughter - this was after his dismissal. Then Yu-cun learned of the general reinstatement for dismissed officials and planned to come up to the capital to take advantage of it. My niece - Ru-hai’s daughter - was, as it so happened, just about to come and visit us here, so her father persuaded her tutor to travel with her and act as her escort. He also sent me a letter of recommendation, asking me to put in a good word for him where I could. I formed a favourable impression of him, and from then on we saw a good deal of one another. One thing I remember finding most extraordinary about Yu-cun: he seemed to have familiarized himself with every detail of our family history. There was nothing he did not know. Who our ancestors were, how they won their titles, every ramification of the Rong-guo and Ning-guo family trees, exactly how many of us there are, who we all are, where we all live, what we all do - why, he was a mine of information! I liked him for it, I must say.
Jia Zheng smiled, and went on:
‘He’s done extremely well for himself in the last few years too. Promoted from Prefect to Censor, then in a few years to Vice-president of the Board of Civil Office, then President of the Board of War. He was demoted three grades for some incident, but now it seems he is to be promoted again.’
‘How hard it is to predict the vicissitudes of human life,’ commented Feng Zi-ying.
‘And yet there is a pattern in all things,’ said Jia Zheng. ‘Take your p earl for instance. The big one is like a man blessed with fortune; the little ones are his dependants, sheltering in the shade of his influence. If the big one goes, then the little ones are helpless. If the head of a family is in trouble, his wife and children are taken from him, his relations are left destitute, even his friends he may see no more. Prosperity may crumble in the twinkling of an eye, like the passing of a spring cloud or the falling of an autumn leaf. What joy is there in public life? My kinsman Yu-cun has had a comparatively easy time of it. But take a case nearer home, the Zhen family, like our own in so many respects**.** They too were ennobled for their services to the Throne. Their style of life has always been very like ours. We used to see a great deal of them. I remember not many years ago when they were here in the capital, they sent one of their men round to convey their respects, and all seemed well. Yet not long afterwards their family estate was confiscated, and goodness alone knows what has become of them now. We have had no news of them for so long. My heart goes out to them.’
‘What’s this about a pearl?’ asked Jia She. Jia Zheng and Feng Zi-ying gave him a description of the ‘Mother Pearl’.
‘We need have no fears,’ said Jia She, resuming the previous topic of conversation. ‘Nothing can happen to us.’
‘Of course not, sir,’ said Feng, ‘with Her Grace to protect your interests at Court, with such enviable connections and such a host of relations, and with a family that from Lady Jia down to the younger generation has such an impeccable record...
‘Granted,’ said Jia Zheng somewhat grimly. ‘But our respectability is more than balanced by our lack of ability and positive achievement. We are living on borrowed time, and one day it will run out.’
‘Do let’s put an end to this depressing conversation,’ said Jia She, ‘and have another drink.’
They did so, and after a few more rounds dinner was served. After dinner, tea was brought in and Feng’s page came in and murmured something in his master’s ear. Feng took his leave.
‘What was that you said?’ asked Jia She of the page. ‘It’s snowing, sir, and they’ve sounded the first evening watch.’
Jia Zheng sent a servant out who came back to report that the snow was indeed already more than an inch thick on the ground.

‘I hope your two curios are well wrapped?’ said Jia Zheng.
‘They are,’ replied Feng. ‘Don’t forget, if you change your minds, I’m sure we can come to some agreement about the price.’
‘I’ll bear it in mind,’ said Jia Zheng.
‘I shall wait to hear from you then. It’s cold - please don’t bother to see me out. Goodbye.’
Jia She and Jia Zheng instructed Jia Lian to accompany Feng Zi-ying to the gate.
For the sequel, please read the following chapter.

CHAPTER 93

A Zhen retainer seeks shelter
in the Jia household
And shady activities are revealed
behind the Iron Threshold

When Feng Zi-ying had gone, Jia Zheng sent for one of the men on the gate.
‘I see there’s an invitation here from the Earl of Lin-an,’ he said. ‘Do you know what sort of an occasion it is?’
‘I did inquire, sir,’ replied the servant. ‘It’s only the arrival of a new company of actors at the Prince of Nan-an’s. They are said to be first-class, and his lordship wants to celebrate by putting on a dramatic entertainment for a couple of days. Just an informal party for friends, nothing requiring a presentation I should say, sir.’
As the servant was speaking Jia She came over.
‘Will you be going tomorrow?’ he asked his brother.
‘I really ought to,’ replied Jia Zheng. ‘The Earl has always been most affable.’
Another servant came in from the gate and reported to Jia Zheng:
‘There’s a clerk from the Ministry, sir; will you please go in to the office tomorrow. The President has some important business for you, so could you be there a little earlier than usual.’
This received a brief acknowledgement. from Jia Zheng. Two family servants came in next, wh6se job it was to collect the land rents from the Rong-guo country estates. They paid their respects, made their kotow and stood humbly to one side.
‘Are you from Hao-family village?’ asked Jia Zheng.
‘Yes, sir.’
Jia Zheng did not inquire any further into their business. He and Jia She talked a little longer and then both left for their apartments, Jia She accompanied by servants bearing lanterns.
When they had gone, Jia Lian asked the rent-collectors for their report.
‘We’ve been as fast as we could with the tenth-month rents, sir,’ replied one of them. ‘They were due to arrive tomorrow, but we ran into trouble a few miles from town. Our wagons were seized by a patrol and everything was tipped out onto the ground. They didn’t let us get a word in. I tried to explain that it was rent-produce for Rong-guo House, not ordinary goods in transit, but they couldn’t have cared less. And when I told our wagoner to keep on going, some of the highway-patrol beat him up and impounded two wagons. I’ve come on ahead to report, sir. The only thing now is for you to send someone to the local yamen and demand our goods back. And you’d be doing everyone a good turn, if you had those hooligans in the highway-patrol brought to order. You may not know it, but the regular goods-wagons have an even worse time with them. They tip out the contents and make off with them, and if the poor old wagoner dares to open his mouth in protest, he has his brains beaten out.’
‘What a preposterous state of affairs!’ exclaimed Jia Lian. He wrote a note at once and handed it to one of his men.
‘Take this to the yamen responsible for impounding the wagons. We want our wagons and all our goods back at once. If we discover the smallest thing missing there’ll be trouble.’
He sent for Zhou Rui. Zhou was out, so he sent for Brightie instead, only to be informed that Brightie had gone out at midday and had still not returned.
‘The lazy bastards! They’re never here when they’re wanted! All they do from one year to the next is slack around at our expense!’

Shouting to his pages to find them both at once, Jia Lian retired to his apartment for the night.

Next morning brought a reminder from the Earl of Linan.
‘I shall be busy at the Ministry,’ said Jia Zheng to his brother. ‘And Lian will have to stay here to sort out this trouble with the rent-wagons. You had better take Baoyu with you for the day.’
Jia She nodded.
‘Very well.’
Jia Zheng sent word to Bao-yu that he was to accompany his uncle to the Earl of Lin-an’s theatre party. Bao-yu was thrilled. He changed, and choosing three of his pages, Tealeaf, Sweeper and Ploughboy, to go with him, came out to pay his morning respects to Jia She. They climbed into their carriages and were soon at the Earl’s palace. A gateman went in to announce their arrival and returned after a brief interval to escort them in.
Jia She led Bao-yu into the main courtyard, which was packed with a noisy throng. They paid their respects to the Earl and exchanged civilities with the other guests before sitting down and joining in the flow of light-hearted conversation. Before long the manager of the troupe came forward with two playbills, an ordinary one and a fancy one in the form of an ivory tablet, and saluting his patrons by dropping one knee to the ground Manchu-style, announced:
‘Will the gentlemen please select their favourite plays?’
Passing along the distinguished company, he came to Jia She, who made his choice. Then catching sight of Bao-yu, he hurried. straight towards him, saluted him most elegantly and said:
‘Will Master Bao be so good as to choose two from our list?’
Ba6-yu studied his face. Those powder-white. cheeks,
those lips as **red** as rouge, that fresh lustre, like a lotus on the water, that lilting gait, like a jade tree swaying in the wind - why, it was his old friend Jiang Yu-han! Bao-yu remembered having heard of his arrival in town with his own troupe. He also remembered wondering why he had still not seen anything of him. Meeting him now in such formal company,. he felt unable to rise spontaneously to his feet, and had to content himself with asking:
‘When did you arrive?’
Jiang glanced quickly from left to right, then with a confidential smile whispered:
‘Surely you knew I was here?’
Bao-yu felt too inhibited to continue the conversation, and made his choice of plays in some confusion.
When Jiang returned backstage, the guests started talking about him.
‘He used to play soubrette parts,’ volunteered one of them. ‘Now that he’s older, he’s given that up and turned manager. He manages the Prince’s resident troupe. Before that he’d already started playing young male leads. He made quite a lot of money, and bought two or three shops. But nothing could keep him from the stage, so he has turned actor-manager.’
Someone asked:
‘He must surely be married by now?’
‘Not yet,’ came the reply. ‘He has strong views on the subject. "Marriage," says he, "is a once-and-for-all thing, a lifetime affair, and not to be trifled with." His bride may be rich or poor, of high or low birth, but the one thing she must possess is talent to match his. So, he’s remained single to this day.’
‘I wonder who the lucky girl will be,’ thought Bao-yu secretly to himself, ‘to marry such a fine fellow...
By now the plays had started. They performed in a variety of styles; the lyrical *kun-qu,* the noisier *gao-qiang* and *yi-qiang,* and the ‘clapper’ style fr6m Shensi to the west. It was a splendid show. At midday the tables were set out, and wine and food were served. After an act or two of the afternoon programme, Jia She showed signs of wanting to leave. But the Earl came over and pressed him to stay:
‘The day is still young,’ he said, ‘and I understand that Bijou intends to perform a scene from ‘The Queen of the Flowers’, their *piece de resistance.’*
When Bao-yu heard this, he secretly prayed for his uncle to stay. Jia She sat down again.
It was soon time for ‘The Queen of the Flowers’, with Jiang Yu-han playing Master Qin, the humble oil-vendor. The scene in which he sits up with the drunken flower-girl Jasper Lute had just the right degree of erotic tenderness, while the drinking duet was exactly as it should be, *amoroso delidoso.* Bao-yu hardly noticed Jasper Lute. He only had eyes for Master Qin. That ringing vocal timber, that crystal diction, that subtle tempo were too much for his sensitive soul. He was enraptured. By the end of the performance he knew beyond any shadow of doubt that Jiang Yu-han was an artist of True Feeling, and not to be compared with the common run of actors. It reminded him of a passage from the chapter ‘On Music’, in the *Liber*

Ritualis:

‘Feeling stirs within and is ernbodied in sound. When that sound is fashioned by art, music is born.’

‘No wonder true lovers of music make so much of "Knowing the Sound", entering into the essence of the music,’ thought Bao-Yu to himself. ‘I must get to the heart of it. Poetry conveys feeling, but music strikes to the very core. From now on I must study it in earnest.’
He was awoken from this rapture by Jia She, who had had enough and this time left before his host had another chance to detain him. Bao-yu had no choice but to follow in his uncle’s steps.
On their arrival home, Jia She went straight to his own apartment, while Bao-yu went to report to his father, who had lust returned from the Board and was discussing with Jia Lian the affair of the impounded rent-wagons.
‘I sent a man with a note today,’ Jia Lian was saying. ‘But the local mandarin was out. The gateman said that his master knew nothing of the affair and had certainly never issued a warrant in connection with it. He said it was a piece of flagrant corruption and extortion on the part of the "scum in the highway-patrol". As this was Jia family property, he said he would have the culprits found and dealt with, and gave his personal guarantee that we would have the vehicles and goods back by tomorrow. If we discover a single thing missing, we are to report to his master and stern measures will be taken. But at present, as his master was away, he asked us as a special favour to be discreet and not bother him with it.’
‘How can such a thing be done without any kind of warrant?’ said Jia Zheng.
‘You don’t seem to realize, Uncle,’ said Jia Lian, ‘that this sort of thing goes on all the time. I think we shall probably have our goods back tomorrow all right.’
Business concluded, Jia Lian left the room. Bao-yu now came forward and reported on his day at the Earl’s. His father asked him a few questions, then sent him on to Grandmother Jia’s.
Jia Lian had not forgotten yesterday’s unaccounted absence on the part of the two menservants, and on leaving Jia Zheng he gave orders for a general assembly of the staff. This time there was a prompt response. After a few preliminary words of reprimand Jia Lian called forward Lai Da, the chief steward.
‘Fetch the general register for all household departments and call the roll. Then I want you to write out an announcement. I want everyone to know that if I detect a single case of absence without leave, or failure to come when sent for, or negligence in any other respect whatsoever, I shall have the culprit immediately flogged and dismissed.’
‘Yes sir!’ replied Lai Da several times. He went out and relayed this to the assembled servants, who all took due note.

Not long afterwards there was an unexpected arrival at the main gate. A man in a felt hat, **blue** cotton gown and sturdy, leather-patched slippers approached and bowed to the janitors on duty. They eyed him up and down and asked him where he hailed from.
‘From the Zhen family in the South,’ was his reply. ‘I have with me a letter from my Master, which I beg you to take in to Sir Zheng.’
When they learned that he was from the Zhen family, the men stood up and made room for the newcomer to sit down.
‘You must be tired. Here, sit down. We’ll take your letter in for you.’
One of them went in to report his arrival and deliver the letter to Jia Zheng. He opened it, and this is what he read:
‘My dear Zheng,
Over many generations our two families have established closeness of friendship and mutual understanding. We have always looked up to your illustrious house with the profoundest respect. Although for my heinous crime a thousand deaths would have been insufficient punishment, thanks td an exceptional act of clemency, I have been favoured with a mild sentence of banishment to the frontier. In the general dispersion of our family establishment, I have a manservant called Bao Yong, who has served me well and though lacking any particular skill, is a thoroughly trustworthy and dependable fellow. If you could see your way to employing him in some humble capacity in your household, my gratitude would be unbounded.
I shall write again when I can. With sincere regards,
Your fellow-graduate and friend,
Zhen Ying-jia.’

Jia Zheng smiled wrily as he reached the end of the letter.

'Here we are overstaffed ourselves,' he mused aloud to himself, 'and the Zhens must send us one of theirs. We shall have to try and find room for him somehow, I suppose.

He turned to the gateman.

'Send this fellow in to see me, and find somewhere for him to stay. There must be some way in which he can make himself useful.'

The gateman went out, and came back with Bao Yong, who prostrated himself before Jia Zheng and performed a threefold kotow. Rising to his feet, he declared solemnly:

'My Master presents his greetings, sir.

Then falling on one knee, he continued:

'Bao Yong offers his humble respects, sir.'

Jia Zheng inquired after Zhen Ying-jia, and surveyed Bao Yong. He was something over five feet tall, broad-shouldered and strongly built, with heavy brows and prominent eyes, a protruding forehead, a long beard and a rough, dark complexion. He stood with his arms hanging respectfully at his side.

'Have you been with the Zhens since birth?' asked Jia Zheng. 'Or have you only served them for a number of years?'

Bao Yong: 'Since birth, sir.'

Jia Zheng: 'Why do you wish to leave them now?'

Bao Yong: '1t was not my wish at all, sir. But the Master insisted that I should, and said that I'd find things here very much the same as with them. That is why I have come here.'

Jia Zheng: 'Your master has not deserved the hardship to which he and his family have been reduced.'

Bao Yong: 'It is not my place to say such things but I think the Master is far too good a man, far too honest in his dealings with people. That is what has brought this trouble on him.'

Jia Zheng: 'But honesty is a great virtue.'

Bao Yong: 'Too much of it doesn't always go down well. Some people are irked by it.'

Jia Zheng (with a smile): 'If that is the case, I feel confident that the Supreme Providence will see justice done.'

Bao Yong was about to say something when Jia Zheng went on:

'Am I right in thinking that your master has a son called Bao-yu?'

Bao Yong: 'That is correct, sir.'

Jia Zheng: 'Tell me, does he work hard at his studies?'

Bao Yong: 'That's a very interesting question sir. There's quite a story behind it. In a way our Master Bao-yu is just like his father, very single-minded, very - how shall I say - dedicated. His life has until recently been dedicated to playing with his sisters and lady cousins. The Master and Her Ladyship have given him quite a few thrashings, all to no effect. A year or so ago, however, when Her Ladyship was away on a trip to the capital, our Master Bao fell seriously ill. He had been given up for dead for a long while in fact, and the Master himself was nearly dead with worry. His funeral clothes were even laid out in readiness. In the end he recovered, thank goodness. When he came round, he said that he had been through a great archway, where he met a lady, who showed him a temple full of cabinets. And in these cabinets were a number of registers, which he saw. Then he went into a room full of girls, who turned into ghosts and skeletons. He was scared and cried out, and that was when he woke up.

'After this experience of his, his father had him treated by a doctor and slowly but surely he became well. This time he was indulged and allowed to play with his sisters and cousins to his heart's content. But who would have thought it - he had completely changed his ways! None of his old games appealed to him any more. Now it was all books and studying. And nobody could distract him. He's even learning to help the Master with family business.'

Jia Zheng was silent, lost in thought. Then he said:

'You may go now. When we have need of you we will find you a proper post.'

'Thank you sir,' said Bao Yong, and withdrew from the room. He was shown to his temporary quarters by some of the servants, and there we must leave him.

A few days later, Jia Zhehg rose early and was passing through the main gate on his way to the Board, when he noticed the porters and servants huddled together in some sort of confabulation. They seemed to be trying to attract his attention, but at the same time were evidently too afraid to speak out, and could only whisper among themselves. He called one of them over and asked:

'What's going on? What's all this muttering in corners about?'

‘We daren’t tell, sir. . .’ replied the servant.
Jia Zheng: ‘Daren’t tell what?’
Servant: ‘Well sir, this morning when I got up to open the gate, I found a sheet of white paper stuck to it with a lot of rude words written on it...
Jia Zheng: ‘What’s this? What sort of thing do you mean?’
Servant: ‘Something about sordid goings-on at the Temple of the Iron Threshold, sir.’
Jia Zheng: ‘Show it to me!’
Servant: ‘I tried to peel it off in one piece, sir, but it was stuck on so firmly that I couldn’t. So I copied the wording down instead and then scrubbed it clean. Li De has just found another one. He showed it to me, and it says much the same. That’s the truth, sir.’
He handed Jia Zheng the most recent specimen. Jia Zheng took it and read:

Jia Qin’s a lucky young sod
He’s in charge of the family nunnery.
All those girls for just one bod -
whoring, gamblng, loads of funnery!
Now that rakes are running the place,
Rong-guo House is a public disgrace!

Jia Zheng was boiling. His head began to swim, his eyes to swirl. Telling the servants at the gate not to breathe a word of this, he gave secret orders to search every alleyway in the neighbourhood for any further posters, and sent at once for Jia Lian, who came hurrying over.
‘Tell me,’ asked Jia Zheng, ‘have you ever personally checked the arrangements made for the nuns and Taoist novices lodged at the Iron Threshold Temple?’
‘Not personally, no,’ replied Jia Lian. ‘That has always been young Qin’s responsibility.’
‘And do you know if he is competent or not?’ asked Jia Zheng.
‘It sounds from what you say as though he must have slipped up over some detail,’ said Jia Lian.
‘Take a look at this!’
Jia Lian read the poster and exclaimed:
‘Why, this is an outrage"
The words were no sooner out of his mouth than Jia Rong came in with a letter bearing the inscription: ‘For the attention of Sir Jia Zheng - *Private and Confidential.*’ Jia Zheng opened it and found it to be an anonymous letter couched in the same terms as the posters.
‘Tell Lai Da,’ he instructed them, ‘to take three or four carts at once to the Temple of the Iron Threshold and bring all the novices back here. This must be kept absolutely secret. He is to say that they are wanted at the Palace.’
Lai Da was given his orders and set off.

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Now when the twenty-four Buddhist and Tabist novices first arrived at the Temple, they had been put under the surveillance of the older Sisters, who gave them their daily lessons and rehearsed them in their liturgies. As the months went by and their services were not once called upon by the Imperial Concubine, the girls became slacker and slacker in their studies. They also began to grow up and show a greater awareness of life. Jia Qin himself was a bit of a young fop, and reckoned that for a pretty young actress such as Parfumee the decision to enter a nunnery must have been a childish whim. She became the first object of his advances, over at Water-moon Priory. To his great surprise he discovered that she was in earnest and not at all willing to comply with his wishes. So he turned his attentions back to the Temple, to two of the young novices, a Buddhist nun called Thurible and a little Taoist nun called Crucible, both extremely attractive and much more cooperative. Many a pleasant hour they spent with him, playing music and singing songs.
In the middle of the tenth month, Jia Qin arrived as usual with the monthly allowance. He had no intention of leaving straight away and announced to them all:
‘I have brought you your month’s allowance. I’m afraid I shall be too late to catch the city-gates tonight and shall have to find somewhere to stay here. On such a chilly night as this, what could be better than for us to share the wine and the few nuts and things that I happen to have with me and make a little party of

it?'
The girls were thrilled and immediately started putting out the tables. They even invited the nuns from Water-moon Priory to join them. Parfumee was the only one to abstain. After a few bowls of wine, Jia Qin suggested a drinking game. Thurible and her friends replied:
'None of us can play those games. Why don't we play guess-fingers instead? Loser to drink a bowl -' that would be great fun!'
'It's only just past midday!' objected one of the Sisters. 'It will never do to start rioting about at this hour. I suggest we take a little drink or two now and then those who wish to may leave. Those of you who want to keep Mr Qin company can drink to your hearts' content this evening. I shall turn a blind eye.'
Just at that moment, however, one of the lay-sisters came bursting into the room.
'Quickly everyone! Break it up! Steward Lai's here, from Rong-guo House!'
The girls rushed around tidying up, and told Jia Qin to hide. He was by now well in his cups, and bragged:
'Why should I hide? I'm here to deliver the month's allowance...
Lai Da was in at the door before he had finished speaking. Signs of the incipient orgy were all too visible, and Lai Da's loyal breast filled with rage. He was under the Master's instructions to keep the whole operation quiet, however, and inquired with a nonchalant smile:
'Would Mr Qin be here by any chance?'
Qin lurched to his feet.
'Why Mr Lai! What brings you here?'
'Pleased to find you here, sir,' said Lai Da. 'We must get the young ladies ready as quickly as possible, and take them back to town. They're wanted at the Palace.'
Jia Qin and the girls wanted to know more, but Lai Da merely said:
'Come along now. It's getting late. We must hurry or we shall miss the gates.'
So they all bundled into the carts that were waiting for them, and Lai Da mounted his sturdy mule and led the convoy into town.

We must return to Jia Zheng. Usually so punctilious in his attendance at the Board, the Master was sitting alone in his study, breathing heavily and brooding over the anonymous posters. Jia Lian hovered within earshot, not daring to leave the house. At last there came the sound of someone at the gate and a messenger came in to report:
'Excellency Zhang is indisposed, and will Sir Zheng please replace him this evening at the Board?'
Jia Zheng had been expecting Lai Da at any nioment. It was most annoying to be called away like this. Jia Lian came in.
'Lai Da didn't leave until after lunch, Uncle, and the Temple is over eight miles from town. He won't be back till eleven o'clock at the earliest. As you are 'on call' for this evening I think you should go. When Lai Da gets back, I shall tell him to keep the nuns locked up and not to say anything until you have had an opportunity of settling the affair yourself tomorrow. If Qin comes, I shall say nothing. We shall see how he reacts when you speak to him tomorrow.'
It seemed reasonable enough, and Jia Zheng left with some reluctance for the Board.
As soon as he had gone Jia Lian set off back to his own apartment, brooding as he went on what he was going to say to Xi-feng. He held her to blame for having given Qin this job in the first place. But then he remembered that she was ill and relented. He had better not be too hard on her. He slackened his pace.

Meanwhile the news had spread among the servants. It soon reached the ears of Patience, who immediately went to tell her mistress. Xi-feng had had a bad night anyway and was feeling very low. Her feeble state intensified her ever-present anxiety about the various misdeeds that lay on her conscience, in particular her unscrupulous dealings at Water-moon Priory. When she learnt of the anonymous poster, she sat up with a jolt and asked Patience:
'What did it say?'
Patience thoughtlessly replied:
'Oh, nothing much. Something to do with the nuns at Water-moon Priory...
This nearly put paid to Xi-feng. Her guilty conscience spelled out for her the rest of the story. She was undone! A spasm of terror quite deprived her of the power of speech. She felt the heat surging within her, her eyes began to swim. She started coughing and collapsed on her bed, her eyes staring rigidly in front of

her.
Patience called out in great agitation:
‘I meant the nuns at the Temple of the Iron Threshold! Something to do with the novices. There’s no cause for you to take on so, ma am.
The words ‘Iron Threshold’ brought Xi-feng back to her senses.
‘Stupid creature! Which is it, for heaven’s sake? The nuns at the Temple or the Priory?’
‘At first I thought it was the Priory,’ replied Patience. ‘Then I found out it was the Temple. That’s why I got it wrong just now.
‘I thought it must have been the Temple,’ said Xi-feng. ‘The Priory has nothing to do with me. But I was the one who gave Qin the job of looking after the nuns at the Temple. He’s probably been making off with some of the money.
‘No, ma’am,’ said Patience, ‘I don’t think it’s anything to do with money. I heard the word ‘filth’ mentioned several times.’
‘Well that’s nothing whatever to do with me. Where s Mr Lian got to?’
‘He’s been in ever since he heard that the Master was in a rage,’ replied Patience. ‘When I heard what sort of an unpleasant affair it was, I told all the servants to keep quiet about it. I hope their Ladyships haven’t heard. The Master has sent Lai Da to bring all the girls back from the Temple. I’ll send someone out to see what’s happened. Now you settle down, ma’am. You’re not well and shouldn’t worry your head over such things.’
Just at that moment Jia Lian came in. Xi-feng would have liked to ask him for more details, but thought better of it when she saw the look on his face. He was obviously in a bad mood and she would be best advised to feign ignorance.
Jia Lian had not finished eating his dinner when Brightie came in.
‘Lai Da’s back, sir.’
‘Is Mr Qin with him?’
‘Yes, sir.’
‘Tell Lai Da the Master has had to go to the Board tonight. He’s to put the girls in the Garden for the time being, and tomorrow when the Master gets back we’ll see about sending them to the Palace. Tell Mr Qin to wait for me in the inner library.’
Brightie disappeared.
Jia Qin went as instructed to the library. On his way he noticed a lot of pointing and muttering among the servants. He could not make out what it was all about, but it was clearly something to do with him. This was beginning to seem less and less like a summons from the Palace. He would have dearly liked to ask one of them what was going on, but felt too uneasy to do so and could only wait there in ever increasing suspense. When Jia Lian arrived, Jia Qin greeted him and stood nervously with his hands at his side.
‘I wonder what Her Grace requires the nuns for at such short notice?’ he ventured. ‘I had to race all the way here. Luckily I was out there anyway today with the monthly allowance and was able to come back with Lai Da. But I’m sure you know all about that.’
‘All about what! You’re the one that should know!’
Jia Qin could make neither head nor tail of this, and stood there tongue-tied.
‘A fine mess you’ve made of things!’ continued Jia Lian. ‘Sir Zheng’s in a fuming rage!’
‘But I’ve done nothing!’ protested Jia Qin. ‘I’ve delivered the allowance on time every month, the girls know their services by heart...
Jia Lian could see that he knew nothing of what had happened. He and Qin had played together as children, and he sighed.
‘You ass! Take a look at this!’
He pulled one of the posters from his boot-flap and threw it in Jia Qin’s direction. Jia Qin picked it up and read it. His face grew ashen pale.
‘Who. could have done this? I’ve never done anyone any harm. Why should anyone want to blacken my name like this? I only go there once a month with the money - this is all lies! Sir Zheng will be very hard on me, I know he will! I shall die of shame! If my mother finds out, she’ll flog me to death!’
He checked that there was no one else in the room and knelt before Jia Lian.
‘Uncle! Please help me! Please!’
He went on knocking his head on the ground, tears streaming down his face. Several thoughts were going through Jia Lian’s mind.
‘Debauchery is Uncle Zheng’s pet abomination. If he finds out that there really has been any such thing we’ll be in for a major scene. It will only help smear the family name, besides. And give the anonymous

author the greatest satisfaction, and then we can expect more of such p6sters in the future. No, why not take advantage of Uncle Zheng's absence, talk to Lai Da and hush the whole thing up. So far there's no proof that anything ever happened. And no one need be any the wiser.'
Having reached this decision, Jia Lian spoke to Jia Qin again:
'There's no point in trying to fool me. Don't think I don't know about every one of your mucky little pranks. Now listen: if you want to get out of this, you must deny everything, absolutely everything, no matter how hard Sir Zheng presses you. Do you understand? Now get up off the ground, you pathetic creature!'
Jia Lian sent for Lai Da and asked him for his opinion.
'As a matter of fact, sir,' said Lai Da, 'Mr Qin was behaving in a very unbecoming manner. When I arrived at the Temple they were all drinking. I'd say the man who wrote the posters was telling the truth.. .'
'Do you hear that, Qin?' said Jia Lian. 'Is Lai Da maligning you too?'.
Jia Qin was by now puce in the face and speechless with embarrassment. Jia Lian took Lai Da by the hand and pleaded with him:
'Spare. the lad, Lai. Say you found him at home. When you take him in to see the Master, there's no need to say that I've already seen him. And tomorrow you can ask the Master not to bother with questioning the nuns. Send for a broker and have them all sold off. If Her Grace should really need them again, we can always buy some more.
Lai Da reflected that there was nothing to be gained by letting the incident blow into a storm. The family's name would only suffer. So he agreed to Jia Lian's proposal.
'You go with Mr Lai now, Qin,' ordered Jia Lian. 'And do whatever he tells you.
Jia Qin kotowed once more to Jia Lian and followed Lai Da out. When they reached a secluded spot, he also kotowed to Lai Da.
'Excuse me for saying so, Master Qin,' said Lai, 'but it was your fault for behaving in such a manner. I don't know who it is that you offended. Can you think who it could be?'
Jia Qin thought for a while, but could think of no particular enemies. He followed Lai Da listlessly out.
To learn how he extricated himself, you must read the next chapter.

CHAPTER 94

Grandmother Jia gives a crab-blossom party:
a celebration of the ominous
Bao-yu loses his Magic Jade: a strange disappearance
of the numinous

Lai Da led Jia Qin off, to await the Master's return in the morning.
The little novices were thrilled to be back in the Garden and were eager to. revisit their favourite haunts, imagining that the next day would be taken up with preparations for their visit to the Palace. Imagine their dismay when they found themselves prisoners: Lai Da's instructions to the old women and pages on duty were to feed them i~ their rooms and keep them in close confinement. The girls. had no idea why they were being treated in this way and spent the night sitting up in suspense. Although the maids in the Garden's various residences knew by now of their arrival, they had only been given the official story and knew nothing of the real facts of the case.
Early next day Jia Zheng, having completed his night duty, was about to leave the Board when another urgent file was passed down to him: the City Wall Repairs Estimates and Accounts for two of the Provincial Capitals, for Immediate Audit. He foresaw a considerable delay, and sent a message home to Jia Lian, authorizing him to go ahead and question Lai Da when he returned from the Temple, and to deal with the case as he saw fit.
Jia Lian received these instructions with relief, mainly on young Qin's behalf, as he would now be spared the Master's wrath. On further reflection, however, it occurred to him that he might attract Jia Zheng's suspicion if he were to brush the entire affair under the carpet. It would be wiser to consult Lady Wang. Then if he incurred the Master's displeasure, at least he would not be solely responsible.
Having decided on this course of action, Jia Lian :went to see Lady Wang and told her what had happened, concluding:
'Uncle Zheng was extremely angry about the anonymous poster and gave orders for Lai Da to bring young

Qin and all the girls here for questioning. Today Uncle is too busy to deal with this sordid matter himself, and has asked me to consult you about it. What do you think we should do, Aunt?'
'I never heard of such a disgraceful business!' exclaimed Lady Wang in horror. 'If young Qin really has behaved in this degrading fashion, the family should have nothing more to do with him. Mind you, it's a despicable way to carry on, to go putting posters up about people... Do *you* suppose there is any truth in it? Have you asked Qin about it yet? What has he to say for himself?'
'I've questioned him,' replied Lian. 'Only a few moments ago, as a matter of fact. Of course he denied the whole thing. But consider, Aunt; supposing he really had done it, do you think he would admit to it? Personally I don't think he did. He knows that the girls are liable to be called to Court at short notice, and would be too scared of a scandal. We could find out the truth easily enough. But what then? What do you suggest?'
'Where are the girls now?' asked Lady Wang.
'They are locked up in the Garden,' replied Jia Lian.
'Do the others know that they are there?'
'They probably all know by now. But so far as they are concerned the girls are on their way to the Palace. That is what everyone has been told.'
'Good,' said Lady Wang. 'We must get rid of these creatures immediately, once and for all. I never wanted to keep them on in the first place it was all your idea and Xi-feng's. Didn't I say it would end in trouble? You'd better tell Lai Da to go through them one by one and find out if they've any relatives left at home. Find their contracts and authorize whatever money is necessary to hire a boat for them - twenty or thirty taels should be enough. Put someone dependable in charge and have them all taken home to wherever they came from in the first place. They can take their contracts with them, and that will be the end of that. Even if one or two of them have been up to some mischief, I don't think it would be fair to punish them indiscriminately, by making them all return to lay-life. And if we hand them over to the official broker who usually finds husbands for orphan girls, even though *we* don't want the body price, someone is sure to try and make money out of them, and no one will think of their welfare. Who knows what might happen to them? As for Qin, I want you to tell him in no uncertain manner exactly what we think of him. He is never to come here again except for a clan sacrifice or some other big celebration. He had better keep well out of Sir Zheng's way too, unless he wants a taste of real trouble. And don't forget to tell the accounts people to cancel the relevant entry.
'Send someone to the Temple,' concluded Lady Wang, 'with strict instructions from Sir Zheng that none of the male members of the clan is to be allowed in there, except for the specific purpose of burning paper-money at the grave-site. And if there is any more nonsense, we will have all the Sisters removed too.'
Jia Lian took this all in and went to give Lai Da his orders.
'That is what Her Ladyship says you are to do,' he said. 'Report to me when you've finished, and I shall report back to Her Ladyship. Look smart. When Sir Zheng comes in, all you need do is repeat Her Ladyship's instructions.'
'It's very charitable of Her Ladyship to deal so generously with these worthless people,' commented Lai Da. 'I'll make sure I pick a good 'un to take them all home, carrying on Her Ladyship's good work, so to speak. And I'll bring young Master Qin in here, sir, for you to deal with. As for that anonymous bill-sticker, I'll track him down, and when I lay my hands on him I'll teach him a lesson he won't forget in a hurry.'
Jia Lian nodded.
'Good.'
Jia Qin was summoned and disposed of, and Lai Da dealt with the girls in accordance with Lady Wang's instructions.
When Jia Zheng came home that evening, Jia Lian and Lai Da both went in to report. Jia Zheng was not a man to look for unnecessary trouble, and was content to consider the matter closed. The news that the Jia household had dismissed twenty-four girl novices soon spread, and every young rake in town fancied the idea of getting hold of one of them for himself. What did happen to the girls in the end, and whether or not they ever reached home, our story does not relate, and it would be idle to speculate.

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Let us return instead to the Naiad's House. With the slight improvement in Dai-yu's health, Nightingale was less busy than usual. Hearing of the arrival of the novices, and curious about the event that called for their presence at Court, she decided to pay a visit to Grandmother Jia's apartment, in the hope of finding out more from one of the maids there. She arrived just as Faithful was coming off duty and the two of them

were able to sit down for a chat. Nightingale mentioned the novices. Their presence in the Garden came as a complete surprise to Faithful who exclaimed:
'That's the first I've heard of it! I'll ask Mrs Lian about it later on, she'll be sure to know.'
At that moment two old women from Mr Fu Shi's establishment came to call on Grandmother Jia, and Faithful went to take them through. Grandmother Jia had just retired for her midday nap, however, so the women exchanged a few words with Faithful and went on their way again.
'Where are those two from?' asked Nightingale.
'They're a tiresome pair,' replied Faithful. 'They're always calling on Her Old Ladyship and telling her how wonderful their Miss Fu is - so sweet-natured, beautiful, well-mannered, softly spoken, a perfect needlewoman, deft with her writing-brush, nimble with her abacus, a paragon of daughterly obedience, kind and ladylike towards the servants, and so on and so forth... Every time they come they treat Her Old Ladyship to the same recital. I can't bear that sort of thing, but Her Old Ladyship seems to love it. And the strange thing is that Bao-yu, who normally finds old women like that most irritating, makes an exception of these two. A few days ago, when they were here last, they said that Mr Fu wouldn't look at any of his sister's suitors (and there are plenty of them), but had set his heart on her marrying into a family like ours. They sung her praises all over again. Somehow they always seem to say just the thing to please the old lady.'
Nightingale looked thoughtful for a moment. Then she asked with affected nonchalance:
'If Her Old Ladyship is so pleased with what they say, why doesn't she marry Bao-yu to the young lady?'
Faithful was on the very point of explaining to Nightingale the real reason, when she heard a call from inside:
'Her Old Ladyship is awake!'
She hurried in, leaving Nightingale to make her own way home.
As Nightingale reached the Garden and began to walk towards the Naiad's House, she thought to herself:
'Anyone would suppose Bao-yu to be the only boy in the world, from the amount of time we all spend thinking about him! My poor mistress lust seems to get more and more besotted with him. Whenever I see her sinking into one of her depressions, I can tell it's because of him. That's what has been making her fall ill all the time too. What with all the uncertainty about the bond of gold and jade, and now this Miss Fu - I don't know! I always thought Bao-yu loved Miss Lin, but from what Faithful said it seems he just flits from one girl to the next. My poor mistress! All your heartache is wasted on him!'
Nightingale had begun by feeling sad on Dai-yu's account, but the more she thought about it the more wretched and confused she began to feel herself. She would have liked to advise Dai-yu not to wear her heart out in such a futile affair, but was too afraid of incurring her displeasure. And yet how could she just stand by and watch her suffer?
Presently, as she turned the problem over and over in her mind, her compassion gave way to a sudden feeling of annoyance and she chided herself:
'Why should I worry about them anyway? Supposing Miss Lin does marry Bao-yu - she'll still be as difficult to please as ever. And Bao-yu may be friendly enough, but I know how fickle he is too. I tell others not to wear their hearts out in vain, and then do so myself! N_9, from now on I shall concentrate on doing my duty and not allow myself to get involved.'
In this new spirit of detachment she continued on her way to the Naiad's House, and arrived to find Dai-yu sitting alone on the kang, going over some of her old poems and other writings. As she entered the room Dai-yu looked up and asked:
'Where have you been?'
'Oh, I just went out for a chat with one of the other maids,' replied Nightingale.
'Was it Aroma?'
'What should I want to see her for?'
The off-hand manner of her reply came as a shock to Dai-yu, who felt most put out and said curtly:
'Do as you please, it's all the same to me. Bring me a cup of tea.'
Nightingale smiled inwardly at the outcome of her experiment and went to pour the tea. As she did so she heard a confused hubbub in the Garden, but could not tell what was going on. She began pouring the tea and sent a junior maid out to investigate the disturbance. The maid returned in a short while to report:
'It's the crab-trees at **Green** Delights. Earlier this year some of them were struck with the blight, and no one bothered to water them. Yesterday Bao-yu went to have a look at them and thought he could see buds on some of the branches. No one believed him or paid any attention to his story at the time. But today there's ho doubt about it, they've come out in the most beautiful blossom! It has caused quite a stir and everyone is hurrying over there to have a look. Even Her Old Ladyship and Her Ladyship have been

caught up in the excitement and are going along to see the blossom. So Mrs Zhu has given orders for all the paths to be cleared of leaves - that's what all the shouting was about.'

Dai-yu heard that Grandmother Jia was coming, she got up to change and sent Snowgoose on ahead, telling her to report back the moment Her Old Ladyship arrived. She soon came running back.

'Her Old Ladyship and Her Ladyship and a lot of the other ladies have all arrived! Hurry, Miss!'

Dai-yu took a brief look in the mirror, passed a comb quickly through her hair and set off with Nightingale in the direction of **Green** Delights. She arrived to find Grandmother Jia installed on Bao-yu's day-couch, and after greeting her and Lady Xing and Lady Wang went on to say hello to Li Wan, Tan-chun, Xi-chun and Xing Xiuyan. She noticed that several people were absent: Xi-feng was ill in bed, Shi Xiang-yun had gone home to see her uncle who was in the capital on transfer, while Bao-qin had stayed at home with Bao-chai, and the two Li sisters, Wen and Qi, had been taken to live elsewhere by their mother, whom recent events had convinced that Prospect Garden was a rather unsuitable environment for her daughters.

They were all chatting away, each propounding a different interpretation of the strange phenomenon of the winter-flowering crab-trees.

'They usually flower in the third month, I know,' Grandmother Jia was saying. 'And we are in the eleventh month now. But then the movable terms in the calendar are rather late this year, so we could say this is more like the tenth month, which is after all sometimes called "Little Spring". With the exceptionally warm weather we have been having, a little blossom is only to be expected.'

'You are quite right, Mother,' agreed Lady Wang. 'We need someone of your experience to show us that this is really nothing out of the ordinary.'

Lady Xing however was not so easily convinced.

'I heard that these trees had already been struck by the blight for almost a year... How do you explain the fact that half-dead trees should start flowering now, at such an odd time of the year?'

Li Wan spoke next.

'I think you are both right,' she said with a smile. 'My own humble suggestion is that they have flowered specially to tell us of some happy event that is about to take place in Bao-yu's life.'

Tan-chun, although she remained silent, was secretly thinking to herself:

'This must be an ill-omen. Everything that is in harmony with nature prospers, and things out of season, out of time, fade and die. Plants and trees obey a natural cycle. If a tree flowers out of season, it must be an ill omen.'

She kept all this to herself, however. It was Dai-yu who spoke next. She had been struck by Li Wan's mention of a happy event, and said with some excitement:

'There was once a family of farmers who had a thorn-bush. There were three sons in the family, and one day these three sons decided to leave home and go their separate ways. No sooner had they gone than the thornbush began to fade away and die. But some time later the brothers began to yearn for each other's company, returned home and were reunited. And at once the thornbush began to flourish again. So you see plants follow closely the fortunes of the people to whom they are attached. Now Cousin Bao is devoting himself seriously to his studies, which pleases Uncle Zheng, which pleases the crab-trees, which is why they are flowering!'

This went down very well with Grandmother Jia and Lady Wang.

'What a well-chosen story! Such an interesting idea!'

Jia She and Jia Zheng now arrived to view the flowers, accompanied by Jia Huan and Jia Lan. Jia She spoke first.

'Cut them down. That's what I say. There's evil work afoot here.'

'On the contrary,' said Jia Zheng. 'Leave them alone. Evil manifestations thrive on such superstition. Ignore them and they disappear.'

'What's all this?' interrupted Grandmother Jia testily. 'We're all gathered here to witness a happy event. Why do you have to start talking about manifestations and what-have-you? When there's good luck then enjoy it while you can. I'll take care of any bad luck. I forbid you to utter another word of such gloomy nonsense.'

This silenced Jia Zheng, and he and Jia She effected an awkward departure. Grandmother Jia was unperturbed and determined to enjoy herself.

'Send someone to the kitchen,' she said. 'We want wine and some nice things to eat. We'll have a little party. I should like you, Bao-yu, Huan and Lan, each to write a poem to celebrate the occasion. Miss Lin has been unwell so she can be excused. If she feels up to it she can help you boys polish yours.'

Turning to Li Wan she continued:

'You and the others come up and have some wine with me.'

‘Yes Grannie,’ said Li Wan, then turning to Tan-chun she laughed and said:
‘This is all your fault, Tan!’
‘What do you mean?’ protested Tan-chun. ‘We’ve been let off the poetry-writing - my fault for what?’
‘Aren’t you the founder of the Crab-flower Club?’ replied Li Wan. ‘I know *that* crab was an Autumn Crab -ut can’t you see? Now the *real* crab-blossom wants to join in too...’
Everyone laughed at the idea.
Food and wine were now served, and they all drank and did their best to humour the old lady with light-hearted conversation. Bao-yu came up to pour himself some wine, and standing there thought up a quatrain which he then wrote out and recited for his grandmother.

I asked the crab-tree why at blossom-time it failed,
Yet now profusely bloomed so long before the spring?
The tree replied: ‘Midwinter marks the birth of light.
Glad tidings to the Mistress of this House I bring.’

It was Huan’s turn next. He wrote his out and began to recite:

Plants should put out buds in spring:
Our crab tree’s timing’s topsy-turvy.
Of all the wonders of the world
Ours is the only winter-flowering tree.

Then Jia Lan made a careful copy of his poem, in immaculate *kai-shu* calligraphy, and presented it to his great-grandmother, who asked Li Wan to read it out for her.

Your mist-congealed beauty blighted in the spring,
Your frosted petals blush now in the snow.
Hail Tree of Wisdom! Whose Rebirth
Adds lustre to our Family Hearth.

When she reached the end, Grandmother Jia commented:
‘I don’t know much about poetry, but I should judge Lan’s good, while I should say that Huan’s was poor. Come on now, everybody come and have something to eat.’
Bao-yu was affected by her jolly mood. But then he thought to himself:
‘Last year when the crab-trees died was the year Sky-bright died. Now the crab-trees have come back to life. That’s all very well for us; but Skybright can never live again...’
This thought threw him into a sudden depression; then he remembered what Qiao-jie had recently said, that Xifeng might be sending him pretty Fivey. Perhaps it was her imminent arrival that the strange blossoming portended? This prospect dispelled his gloom and he became his smiling self once more.
Grandmother Jia stayed a while longer, then returned to her apartment, leaning on Pearland escorted by Lady Wang and the others. As she was leaving, Patience came hurrying up, her face wreathed in smiles:
‘Mrs Lian heard that you were here viewing the flowers,’ she said, ‘and though she couldn’t come herself, she asked me to come and attend to Your Ladyships and to bring this parcel. It contains two rolls of **red** silk for Master Bao to decorate the trees with, and comes with Mrs Lian’s congratulations on the happy event.’
Aroma came forward to receive the parcel and presented it to Grandmother Jia, who beamed with delight.
‘Trust Fengie to think of the right thing! What a nice idea! So distinguished!’
Aroma gave Patience a smile.
‘Please thank Mrs Lian for Master Bao when you go back, will you?’ she said. ‘The happy event she is referring to is one that will make all of us happy, I’m sure..
When Aroma said this, it dawned on Grandmother Jia that Xi-feng was thinking of Bao-yu’s marriage, and her face lit up.
‘Aiyo!’ she exclaimed. ‘Of course! It never occurred to me! Fengie may be laid up in bed, but she’s still the cleverest of us all. What a perfect thing to send!’
As she said this, she was already walking away from **Green** Delights, followed by her entourage. Patience whispered to Aroma:
‘Actually Mrs Lian says this flowering is an ill-omen, and you’re to cut strips of this **red** silk and hang

them on the trees; that will help turn the bad luck into good. And in future you're to avoid any superstitious chat about it.'
Aroma nodded and saw Patience out.

Earlier that day, Bao-yu had been lounging around indoors, casually dressed in a fur-lined gown with slits at the sides. When he caught sight of the flowering crab-trees through the window, he went out to look at them. The more he gazed at the blossom the more lovely and poignant it seemed, the more strangely it seemed to reflect the mysterious vagaries of destiny, the joy and pathos of life. It was the embodiment of his own thoughts and feelings. Then, when he heard that Grandmother Jia was coming over, he hurried in to change into more formal attire, choosing a pale fox-lined robe with cut-away archer's sleeves and a darker jacket, also fox-lined, to go with it. He emerged again properly dressed to receive his grandmother, and in his hurry quite forgot to put on his Magic Jade.
When Grandmother Jia left he went on again to change back into his comfortable clothes, and it was then that Aroma detected the absence of the jade and asked him where it was.
'I was in such a rush when I came in to change,' he replied. 'I took it off and left it on the kang-table. Then I forgot to put it on again.'
Aroma looked but it was not on the table. She searched everywhere but could see no sign of it. She began to feel frightened, and broke into a cold sweat.
'Please don't worry,' Bao-yu begged her. 'It must be somewhere in the room. It's bound to turn up. Ask the others - they might know.'
It occurred to Aroma that Musk or one of the other maids might have hidden it somewhere as a practical joke and she bore down on them with an expression of playful accusation:
'You mean lot! Can't you think of a better way of amusing yourselves? Come on, where have you hidden it? Don't take this too far! If it really did get lost we'd be in real trouble, all of us!'
But Musk replied with a straight face:
'What on earth do you mean? We'd know better than to play a trick like that. We're not that silly. You're the one who should stop and think a minute. Try to remember where you put it, instead of laying the blame on us!'
Aroma could tell that Musk was in earnest and cried out in alarm:
'Heaven save us then! Oh little ancestor, where *can* you have put it? You must try to remember!'
'I do,' replied Bao-yu, 'I remember quite clearly putting it on the kang-table. Have another look for it.'
The maids were too scared to tell anyone else, and joined together in a furtive search. This went on for most of the day but there was still no sign of the jade. They emptied every box, and rummaged in every trunk, until there simply was nowhere left to look and they began to wonder if perhaps one of the visitors might have picked it up earlier in the day.
'How would anyone dare do such a thing?' said Aroma. 'Everyone knows how important it is, and that Master Bao's very life hinges on it. Ask about it, but be very discreet. If you find out that one of the maids has taken it and is playing a trick on us, kotow to her and beg for it back. If it's a junior maid who's stolen it, don't tell a soul, just do whatever is necessary to get it back. Give her whatever you like in exchange. This is very serious. It
would be terrible if we lost the jade, worse even than losing Master Bao himself!'
Musk and Ripple set off on this mission. Aroma hurried out after them with a few final words of instruction:
'On second thoughts, leave the people who were here at lunch-time till last. If it turns out to be someone else, we don't want to offend them and cause a lot of ill-feeling to no purpose.
The two maids split up to make their inquiries, but everywhere they went it was the same story. Nobody knew anything about it. Everybody was equally taken aback by the news. They hurried back to report their lack of success, and stared at one another in despondent silence. Bao-yu himself was now beginning to look rather stunned, and Aroma was so desperate that she could only weep helplessly. What could they do? There was nowhere left to look. They were too scared to tell any of the elder members of the family. The entire establishment at **Green** Delights was immobilized with fear and resembled a group of wooden statues or clay dolls.
One by one the others who had heard the news began to arrive, among them Tan-chun, who immediately gave orders for the Garden gate to be shut and sent an old serving-woman and two maids on another comprehensive search, announcing to everyone present. that there would be a substantial reward for the recovery of the jade. They were all keen to establish their own innocence, and this, with the added

incentive of winning the reward, now led to a flurry of indiscriminate searching. Every nook and cranny of the Garden was explored, not excluding the lavatories, but to no avail. It was as hopeless as hunting for an embroidery needle, and as evening drew on there was still no trace of the missing jade. Li Wan now sensed the urgency of the situation and said:

'I have a suggestion to make. It's not the sort of thing I would usually like to suggest but in the present circumstances I feel I must...'

They all gave her their attention.

'Things are so desperate that I think we have to try anything. Now apart from Bao-yu, all the residents of the Garden are girls. I should like you all to ask your maids to remove their dresses, so that we can search everyone properly. If that produces no results, then we should send them to search the older serving-women and cleaners. Do you all agree?'

The consensus of opinion was that she was right. With so many people involved, and such confusion, this seemed the only way of establishing anyone 5 innocence. Tan-chun was the only one to abstain from making any comment.

The maids were eager. to clear themselves, and Patience was the first to volunteer. One by one they all undid their dresses and filed past, while Li Wan supervised the examination. Tan-chun could contain herself no longer.

'My dear Wan, can't you see what a futile waste of time this all is? Supposing someone has stolen it; do you really think he or she would be foolish enough to carry it around? Anyway, why should anyone want to steal it? It means a lot to us, but outside this household it's quite valueless. If you ask me, someone's doing this out of spite.'

They all knew immediately whom she was referring to. Jia Huan had been in and out of **Green** Delights many times that day. No one was prepared to mention his name, however, and she was obliged to be more specific herself:

'It must be Huan. Who else would play such a nasty trick? Send someone secretly oVer to his room and bring him here. Get him on his own and talk him into producing the jade, then threaten to expose him unless he keeps his mouth shut, and there's our mystery solved.'

Amid much nodding of heads, Li Wan turned to Patience and said:

' You'd better go. This will require all your tact.'

, ' Yes ma'am,' replied Patience, and hurried off.

A few minutes later, when she returned with Jia Huan, the others pretended hardly to notice his arrival. One of them made him a pot of tea and placed it on a table in the inner room. Then they all shuffled out and left the scene clear for Patience. She gave him an ingenuous smile.

'Master Bao's jade has gone missing.. .1 don't suppose you've seen it anywhere have you?'

Jia Huan's face instantly flushed to an ugly shade of **purple**. He glowered at her.

'Just because somebody's lost something, does that mean that I automatically become the suspect and get called in for interrogation? Have I got a criminal record or something?'

Patience decided to change tack, and said with a smile:

'Of course no one would dream of suggesting you stole it! They just thought that perhaps you might have hidden it somewhere as a practical joke, and that by asking you if you'd seen it I might be able to get a few clues as to where they should look for it.'

'It's *his* jade, isn't it?' replied Jia Huan indignantly. 'He's the one that wears the thing - ask him, not me! You're all so keen to please him, that's your trouble! If something's found I never get to hear of it! But the moment anything's lost, it's me that gets the blame!'

He got up and stomped out of the room. The maids stepped back to let him through.

All this only served to exasperate Bao-yu.

'The amount of trouble that wretched thing has caused!' he said. 'I've no desire for it and I wish you would all forget about it. Now look what we've done. Huan will go and tell everybody and we'll never hear the end of it.'

'Little ancestor, *please*. ..' came tearfully from where Aroma stood in the throng of distraught maids. 'It's all very well for you to say "forget about it"! But what you seem to have forgotten is that if their Ladyships get to hear, the likes of us will be torn to shreds and ground to powder!'

This was followed by prolonged wailing. It soon became clear to them all that things could not be hushed up for much longer. They would have to agree on a story to tell Grandmother Jia and the other ladies.

'That's easy,' said Bao-yu. 'Just tell them I smashed it myself.'

'No no! That's no good!' said Patience. 'Can't you see? They'll want to know why you smashed it, and then things will look just as black for Aroma and the others. And besides, what if they want to see the pieces?'

‘Well then, say I lost it on a trip to town.’
There was a moment’s silence as they all pondered this suggestion.
‘We might possibly have got away with that,’ said someone at last. ‘But during the past few days you haven’t been to school, and you haven’t been out anywhere either.’
‘Yes I have,’ Bao-yu corrected them. ‘A few days ago I went to the Earl of Lin-an’s to watch the plays. You can say I lost it then.’
‘No, that won’t do,’ said Tan-chun. ‘If you lost it as long ago as that, they’ll want to know why it hasn’t been reported till now.’
They were still busy discussing the relative merits of these various fictions when suddenly they heard the voice of Aunt Zhao, cursing and wailing her way towards them.
‘If you lose something, why can’t you look for it yourselves, instead of sneaking up and blaming my boy? Well, here he is! Take him! Sacrifice him if you think it will do you any good! Kill him! Hack him to pieces! Do what you like with him!’
She propelled Jia Huan into the room, c’rying:
‘Thief! Hurry up and confess your crime!’
This brought loud and angry protestations from Huan. Li Wan was just bracing herself to intervene and make the peace when a maid came rushing in and announced:
‘Her Ladyship is here!’
Aroma and the maids could see that a confrontation was
now inevitable. Bao-yu and the girls went out at once to receive Lady Wang. Aunt Zhao’s wrath subsided for a moment and she followed them out. From the startled look on their faces Lady Wang could see that what she had heard must be true.
‘Is it really lost?’ she cried.
No one dared reply. Lady Wang walked in, sat down and called Aroma forward. Aroma fell trembling to her knees. In a choked voice she murmured ‘Yes.’
‘Well, get up!’ said Lady Wang. ‘We must have a thorough search made. Come on, this helpless attitude will never do.’
Aroma was sobbing and could not say a word. Bao-yu finally spoke up, fearful that she might blurt out the truth.
‘Mother, this has nothing to do with Aroma. I lost it the other day on my way back from seeing the plays at the Earl of Lin-an ‘5.’
‘Then why didn’t you look for it at the time?’
‘I didn’t want anyone to know. I just told Tealeaf to look for it everywhere along the street.’
‘Nonsense! You know perfectly well that Aroma or one of your other maids would have noticed. That’s their job. They are always with you when you change. Whenever you come in from a party or any kind of excursion, if one of your handkerchiefs is missing, or a little purse, they’re bound to ask you where it’s gone do you really think that they would allow something as irreplaceable as your jade to disappear, and not say a word?’
Bao-yu was stumped for an answer. Aunt Zhao, who was gloating over his discomfiture, hastened to put in:
‘If you’re so sure you lost it outside, why try to pin the blame on Huan?’
‘That’s enough from you!’ said Lady Wang sharply. ‘You keep out of this!’
Aunt Zhao was reduced to silence. It was left to Li Wan and Tan-chun to give the true story, which brought tears to Lady Wang’s eyes. In her agitation she was for telling Grandmother Jia and going over to Lady Xing’s apartment to question the members of her household who had been to **Green** Delights earlier in the day.
The news had meanwhile reached Xi-feng on her sickbed. When she heard that Lady Wang had arrived at **Green** Delights she felt obliged to put in an appearance and, leaning on Felicity’s arm, made her way towards the Garden. She arrived just as Lady Wang was about to leave.
‘Good evening, Aunt.’
Xi-feng’s voice trembled slightly as she spoke. Bao-yu and the others came up to greet her.
‘So you’ve heard the news too!’ said Lady Wang to Xifeng. ‘Most extraordinary! It vanished just like that, and can’t be found anywhere. Think for a moment: of all the maids, including all of Lady Jia’s and even your own Patience, which would you say showed thieving tendencies, or had a malicious disposition? I intend to tell Lady J ia, and to order a thorough search. Until we find it, Baoyu’s life hangs in the balance!’
‘Ours is such a large household,’ said Xi-feng, ‘and, as the saying goes, you can know a man’s face, but never his heart. With all the commotion of a search, everyone is bound to hear, and the thief will be so

scared of the consequences that rather than be caught, he could well panic and destroy the evidence - the jade itself - and *then* where would we be? No, my advice, for what it is worth, is that we should let it be known that Bao-yu threw it away in disgust and that it really doesn't matter. Everyone must be very discreet so as to keep Her Old Ladyship and Sir Zheng from knowing. Meanwhile we can search everywhere in secret, and if we're clever we should end up with both the jade and the thief. Does that make sense to you, Aunt?'

After a long pause Lady Wang replied:

'It's all very well, but will we ever succeed in keeping this from Sir Zheng?'

She called Jia Huan to her.

'It was very silly of you to go shouting your head off about Bao-yu's jade, just because they asked you about it. If the thief has heard and destroys the jade, you will pay for it with your life!'

'I promise never to mention it again!' wailed Jia Huan in terror. This time Aunt Zhao held her tongue.

'There must be some places left where you haven't looked,' Lady Wang continued, addressing the assembled maids. 'It must be somewhere here. It's hardly going to fly away, is it? But when you look, be as quiet as possible. Aroma, I give you three days to find it. If we still haven't found it by then, we shan't be able to keep it from Her Old Ladyship and Sir Zheng any longer. And everyone knows what that will mean!'

Bidding Xi-feng accompany her, Lady Wang set off for Lady Xing's apartment, for further consultations on how to apprehend the thief.

Li Wan and the others continued to debate what to do. They sent for the various domestics in charge of the Garden and gave orders for the gates to be securely locked. Steward Lin's wife was also summoned and given confidential instructions.

'Tell the servants on both gates that absolutely no one is to be allowed *out* of the Garden for the next three days. We can allow freedom of movement *within* the Garden, but no one must leave. Say that something has been lost and that no one can go out until it's found.'

'Yes, Mrs Zhu,' said Lin's wife. 'Excuse me, ma'am,' she went on, 'but we lost something at home the other day - nothing of any value of course, but my husband was determined to find it, and he went and consulted one of those word-diviners that set themselves up at street corners. Iron Mouth Liu I think this one's name was. His reading was very clear. My husband followed his instructions, and found the missing item straight away.'

When Aroma heard this she begged her to help them.

'Oh, Mrs Lin! Please go and ask your husband to consult this man for us!'

'Indeed I will. Straight away.

Lin's wife bustled off. Xing Xiu-yan now had a suggestion to make.

'If you ask me, those word-diviners and fortune-tellers you find on street corners are all charlatans. But when I knew Adamantina, in the South, before she came to live here, I heard of her gift for the planchette. Why don't we ask her to hold a séance for us? Didn't .Bao-yu's jade have a mysterious origin anyway? It would surely lend itself to that sort of approach.'

The others seemed greatly surprised to hear this, and reflected that in all the time they had known her, Adamantma had never once mentioned such a gift. Musk earnestly beseeched Xiu-yan:

'Oh, Miss! I don't think she would agree to do it for anyone but you! Please, *please*, will you ask her for us? I'll kotow to you - if she finds the answer, I'll be indebted to you for a lifetime!'

She was about to perform a kotow, but Xiu-yan raised her from the ground. Dai-yu and the others added their entreaties to Musk's, and Xiu-yan left with all speed for **Green** Bower Hermitage.

No sooner had she gone, than Steward Lin's wife returned from her mission.

'Ladies!' she announced with great jubilation. 'I bring good news! My husband has been to see the man~ and he says the jade is sure to turn up. Someone will definitely bring it back.'

She had yet to convince her audience however - except for Aroma and Musk, who were ready to grasp at the slightest hope. Tan-chun asked:

'What word came up, and what was the reading?'

'He said a lot,' replied Lin's wife, 'and some of it I couldn't understand. But I know the word was *shang* (1)
meaning '(to reward". Iron Mouth Liu took one look at it and said, "You've lost something, haven't you?"!'

'Goodness! He sounds pretty good!' exclaimed Li Wan.

Lin's wife continued:

'Then he went on to say that as *shang* was made up of *xiao* (2) meaning "small" on top, with *kou (3)*
meaning "mouth" in the middle, the lost object was small enough to fit inside the mouth. It must be some

jewel or precious stone.
Amid cries of ‘Miraculous!’ and ‘Go on!’, Lin’s wife continued:
‘Then he said that we should be careful to notice that the radical element was *bei (4)* meaning "a cowry shell" and *not* the similar radical *jian (5)* meaning "to appear", hence the object’s disappearance. . . And the top element of the word taken as a whole was very like *dang (6)* meaning "to pawn", so we should go straight to the pawnshop. Then he pointed out that by adding a *ren (7)* "man" to the left-hand side, the compound *chang* (8) meaning "to redeem" was formed. Find the man in the pawnshop, pay the price, and the lost object will be redeemed...’
‘What are we waiting for?’ cried the girls. ‘Search the neighbourhood! If we work our way through the pawn-shops, we’re sure to find the right one sooner or later. And once we’ve found the jade, it will be easy enough to find the thief.’
‘Find the jade and we needn’t even bother who the thief is,’ said Li Wan. Turning to Steward Lin’s wife she continued: ‘Go and tell Mrs Lian what you have just told us. Then she can tell Her Ladyship and set her mind at rest. And ask Mrs Lian to send someone out to search the pawnshops.’
Lin’s wife set off at once.
Things seemed more hopeful now, and relative calm was restored. They were waiting in a somewhat bemused state for Xiu-yan to return when they saw Tealeaf beckoning from the gateway ~ one of the junior maids. She ran out and he said:
‘Quick! Go in and tell Master Bao and their Ladyships and the ladies and young misses that I’ve got the most wonderful piece of news!’
‘Well come on!’ burst [6]ut the maid. ‘What is it? Out with it!’
Tealeaf started laughing and clapping his hands.
‘All right, I’ll tell you. And then you can go in and tell them, and we can split the reward between us. Guess what? The most reliable information has reached me as to the whereabouts of the Missing Jade!’
The outcome of all this excitement will be related in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 95

A rumour comes true and the Imperial Consort passes away
A counterfeit is deceptively like the real thing, and Bao-yu loses his wits

There was Tealeaf at the entrance to **Green** Delights, proclaiming his discovery of the missing jade. A junior maid hurried in to tell Bao-yu. The others, when they heard, propelled Bao-yu towards the entrance to question Tealeaf, while they stood listening in the covered gallery. Bao-yu, greatly relieved at the news, walked out and asked Tealeaf:
‘Where did you find it? Come on, give it to me.’
Tealeaf replied:
‘I’m afraid I couldn’t bring it with me. I need a guarantor.’
‘But how did you find it? Tell me, and I’ll send someone to fetch it.’
‘I heard that Steward Lin was going to consult the word-diviner,’ said Tealeaf, ‘so I went along with him. When I heard the word ‘pawnshop’, I didn’t wait to hear the rest, but went racing round the pawnshops. I described the jade to them, and eventually one of them said, “We’ve got it.” I asked him to hand it over, but he insisted on having the pawn-ticket. When I asked him how much it had been pawned for, he said he had one for three hundred taels and another for five hundred. The one for three hundred was brought in the day before yesterday, the one for five hundred came in today.’
‘Quick,’ interrupted Bao-yu. ‘Take three hundred taels *and* five hundred. Get them both, and we can see which is the right one.’
But Aroma called out jeeringly from within:
‘You’re not going to take any notice of him, are you? I remember my elder brother telling me when I was a little girl, that the people who deal in that kind of jade pawn one or two from their stock when they are short of cash. Every pawnshop must have at least one of them.’
At first everyone had been carried away by Tealeaf’s story. But now, after reflecting on what Aroma had just said, they all began to laugh.
‘Come inside, Master Bao. Don’t listen to that fool. Whatever it is he’s talking about, it obviously isn’t the

real thing.'
Bao-yu laughed too. At that moment, Xiu-yan returned fr6m her mission.
On her arrival at **Green** Bower Hermitage, she had come straight to the point. Would Adamantina consult the planchette for them? Her request met with a scornful laugh.
'I thought you were above such worldly things, Xiu-yan. I am sure we should never have been such friends if I had known you would ever let idle talk induce you to come bothering me. Anyway, I'm afraid this planchette you mention is something I am not familiar with.'
With this, she clearly intended to dismiss the subject, and Xiu-yan regretted ever having come. She knew what a difficult disposition Adamantina had. But now that she had broached the subject, it seemed such a pity to return empty-handed. She made no attempt to insist on her friend's psychic powers, but instead tried to win Adamantina around by speaking of the urgent light in which Aroma and the others viewed the loss. At this, Adamantina showed signs of relenting, and Xiu-yan rose to her feet and bowed humbly before her several times. Adamantina sighed.
'Are we to be at everyone's beck and call? Since I have been here, I have kept this a secret. Now, if I make an exception for you, I shall never be left in peace.'
'I felt I had to come, their need seemed so great,' replied Xiu-yan. 'I knew that you would feel sorry for them. If anyone else should ask, you will be quite free to say no. No one would ever press you into it.'
Adamantina laughed. She told one of the lay-sisters to light some incense, and went herself to fetch the tray of sand and the planchette-wand from a chest. After writing out the requisite incantation, she told Xiu-yan to kneel and pray. When this was done, they both stood and held the wand by its double handle. Before long it began to move across the tray. The characters it traced with a rapid motion in the sand read as follows:

ALAS!
IT LEFT NOR TRACE
NOR SIGN.
GONE TO GREENSICKNESS PEAK, TO LIE
AT THE FOOT OF AN AGE-OLD PINE
WHY TRAVERSE COUNTLESS MOUNTAINS,
SEARCHING FOR YOUR FRIEND?
FOLLOW ME AND LAUGH TO SEE
YOUR JOURNEY AT AN END!

The writing ceased, and the wand came to rest.
'Which spirit did you invoke?' asked Xiu-yan.
'Iron Crutch Li,' replied Adamantlna.
Xiu-yan copied down the writing, and asked Adamantma to give an explanation of the line.
'How could I?' she replied. 'I don't understand them myself. Take it back to the others. Many of them are far cleverer than I am, I'm sure.'
Xiu-yan did not press her, but returned to **Green** Delights. On her arrival, she was besieged with questions.
'Tell us what happened!' they all cried.
Instead of giving them a lengthy description of the seance, Xiu-yan handed her transcript straight to Li Wan. The girls and Bao-yu crowded round to read it. Between them they came to the following interpretation of the lines: the jade would not be found by looking for it, and yet it was not irretrievably lost. At some unforeseeable time, when no one was looking for it, it would just turn up. But as for **Green**-sickness Peak, no one had any idea where that could be.
'It may be some sort of hidden clue,' suggested Li Wan. 'We've certainly never had such a mountain in our garden, and one is not going to spring suddenly from nowhere. The only explanation I can think of is that whoever stole the jade lost his nerve and threw it away, and now it 5 lying beneath some miniature mountain in a rockery somewhere near a pine-tree. But what's all this about 'follow me' at the end?'
'Who was the spirit invoked?' asked Dai-yu.
'Iron Crutch Li,' Xiu-yan informed her.
'He'd be a hard one to follow!' protested Tan-chun.
Aroma, meanwhile, in her desperation, took the words quite literally and set to in earnest, searching blindly everywhere. She left no stone in the garden unturned, but all to no avail. When she returned, Bao-yu did not even ask her if she had had any success, but just gave her a silly grin.
'Little ancestor!' cried Musk. 'For pity's sake tell us where you lost it! At least then if we have to suffer for it, we will know why!'

‘You wouldn’t listen to me when I said I’d lost it outside,’ protested Bao-yu. ‘How am I supposed to know any better now?’
Li Wan and Tan-chun suggested that they had all had a long and tiring day. It was now eleven o’clock. Dai-yu, they observed, had been too weary to stay up any longer, and had gone home on her own.
‘We should all go to bed now,’ they proposed. ‘Tomorrow we can start afresh.’
The gathering dispersed. Bao-yu went straight to sleep. Aroma and the other maids, however, were quite unable to get to sleep, and sat up all night long, weeping and brooding by turns.
But we must leave them for a while, and turn our attention to Dai-yu. When she reached home, her thoughts turned once more to the subject that had always preoccupied her, the bond of gold and jade between Bao-yu and Bao-chai. On this occasion, her conclusions were more gratifying than usual.
‘How can there have been any truth in the prophecy made by the Monk and the Taoist?’ she argued with herself. ‘If there really were a bond of gold and jade, how could Bao-yu lose his jade like this? Perhaps I am an unforeseen circumstance that has broken the bond...
More reflections of this kind brought her an unwonted peace of mind. Her weariness after the day’s exertions seemed to fall from her, and she began reading again. Nightingale, however, was worn out, and urged her mistress repeatedly to go to sleep. Dai-yu lay down, but continued to think. This time it was the crab-trees that occupied her thoughts.
‘Bao-yu.’s jade is no ordinary stone. He was born with it, and whatever happens to it is highly significant. If the crab-blossom were a good omen, then why should he lose his jade at the same time? It must be inauspicious. I’m afraid something unlucky will happen to him.’
Down went her spirits again. And then she saw it in yet another light, and became optimistic once more. Perhaps both the blossoming *and* the loss of the jade were meant **to** happen, were both in some way timely and auspicious.

She lay awake in the throes of these conflicting emotions, and Only fell asleep in the early hours.
Early the next morning, Lady Wang sent servants to make inquiries in the pawnshops, while Xi-feng set in motion her own secret investigations. Several days went by, but despite their combined efforts, there was still no sign of the missing jade. Luckily word of the disaster had **as yet** reached neither Grandmother Jia nor Jia Zheng. But Aroma and the other maids lived from day to day in unbearable suspense, while Bao-yu, who had now been absent from school for several days, was becoming progressively more morose, listless and silent. Lady Wang was not too worried by this, judging it to be a temporary affliction brought on by the loss of his jade.
She was sitting one day lost in thought, when Jia Lian came into her room, and having paid his respects, announced with a complacent smile:
‘Uncle Zheng has today had word from Yu-cun that Uncle Wang Zi-teng has been promoted to a position in the Grand Secretariat. He has received an Imperial Decree to proceed to the capital. His official instatement is to be on the twentieth of the First month of next year, and an urgent dispatch has been sent to summon him from the frontier. He will be travelling day and night, and should be here in half a month or so. I have come especially to bring you this news, Aunt.’
Lady Wang was absolutely delighted. She had only just been thinking how few of her own family she had around her, a deficiency that had been highlighted during her sis**ter’s latest** troubles. Her brother Zi-teng had been too far away to be able to wield any influence on their behalf. But now, with his new appointment and return to the capital, she could expect a revival of Wang family prestige from which Bao-yu too would be able to benefit. For the time being she felt able to dismiss her anxiety over the missing jade, and looked forward more and more to her brother’s return.
A day or two later, Jia Zheng came in unexpectedly, and with tear-stained face and voice choking with emotion, told her:
‘You must inform Mother immediately that her presence is required at once at the Palace. There is no need for a large party to go. It will be sufficient if you escort Mother. Her Grace has suddenly been taken ill, and has fallen into a coma. There is a court eunuch waiting outside. He says the official diagnosis by the College of Physicians is an incurable stroke.’
Lady Wang burst into tears.
‘This is no time for crying,’ said Jia Zheng. ‘You must go and tell Mother at once. Break it to her gently. We must not cause the old lady too much of a shock.’
So saying, Jia Zheng went out to give the staff their instructions. Lady Wang dried her eyes and went in to Grandmother Jia’s apartment. She said simply that Yuanchun was ill, and that they must go to the Palace to present their respects.’
‘Merciful Buddha!’ exclaimed Grandmother Jia. ‘How can she have fallen ill again? Last time if you

remember I had such a fright, and then we found out that I had been imagining it all. If Only I were imagining it now!'

Lady Wang talked to the old lady, and at the same time urged Faithful and the other maids to look out her court robes and begin attiring her. She then went in haste to her own apartment, dressed and returned to wait on Grandmother J ia. In a short while they were ready, and walked out from the main hall to the sedan-chairs that were waiting to carry them to the palace.

Yuan-chun, since her elevation to the Imperial Bed-chamber, had been the cherished object of the emperor's favours, and had become as a result somewhat plump. From the constant pressure and daily exhaustion of life at court, she had also developed a chronic bronchial condition. A few days previously, when returning late from attendance at a banquet, she had c~ught a chill,. which soon brought on her old complaint. This time, however, it was a severe attack. Phlegm completely obstructed her passages, causing a coldness and faintness in her limbs. The emperor was informed, and a court physician summoned at once. But she could swallow none of the medicines that he prescribed, and even the decongestant salts they tried to administer had no beneficial effect. Concerned at her critical condition, her attendant eunuchs reported again to His Majesty, requesting that the necessary precautions be taken. And so her immediate family were summoned to the Palace.

Grandmother Jia and Lady Wang presented themselves at the palace, and entered the Imperial Concubine's Bed-chamber, to find her choked with phlegm, with saliva dribbling from her mouth, no longer capable of speech. When she saw her grandmother coming towards her, her face took on the most pitiful expression, as if she wanted to weep but no longer had the strength to do so. Grandmother Jia came forward to do homage, and offered a few words of comfort. A little later, the official cards of Jia Zheng and company were brought in, and a lady-in-waiting presented them for Her Grace's inspection. She no longer had the strength to look at them, however, and her face was growing paler minute by minute.

The eunuchs were about to report to the emperor again, and foreseeing that the other concubines would soon arrive to pay their last respects, asked the Jia relatives if they would kindly step outside and wait in one of the ante-chambers of the Palace. Grandmother Jia and Lady Wang had no choice but to conform to court regulations, and wrench themselves away. Holding back their tears, they left the chamber with sorrowful hearts.

They could see messages being passed within the Palace, and shortly afterwards a eunuch came out and sent for an official from the Imperial Board of Astronomy. Grandmother Jia knew Only too well what this meant. He was requesting an auspicious date for the funeral. It was all over. But still she dared not make a move. It was not long before a junior eunuch came out to make the official announcement:

'Her Grace the Jia Concubine has passed away.'

It was the nineteenth of the twelfth month. Spring Commencement fell on the eighteenth of the twelfth month of that year, being the year *Jia Yin;* the nineteenth of the month was therefore also, astrologically speaking, within the month *Yin* of the following *Mao* year. Her Grace was forty-three years old.

Grandmother Jia rose, and doing her best to remain composed, left the Palace, climbed into her sedan and was carried home. Jia Zheng and company had also been informed, and they too made the sad journey home. Lady Xing, Li Wan, Xi-feng, Bao-yu and other members of the family were lined up on both sides of the courtyard before the main hall of Rong-guo House to greet first Grandmother Jia, then Jia Zheng and Lady Wang as they returned. Our narrative passes over the tearful family scene.

Early next day, all members of the family with official rank went to the Palace to pay their last respects, and to mourn as the rites prescribed. The details of Yuan-chun's tomb were the responsibility of the Minister of Works, and Jia Zheng found himself being frequently entertained by his President, and consulted by his colleagues. It was a very busy time - not at all like the period of the previous court funerals for the Dowager Empress and the Zhou Concubine. Because Yuan-chun had died without issue, she was given the posthumous title: 'Illustrious and Chaste Imperial Concubine'. This was in conformity with state precedent. But of this no more.

Everyone in the Jia family was kept extremely busy, travelling to and from the Palace daily for the duration of the funeral; Luckily Xi-feng's health had improved a little of late, and she was able to get up and manage the household. She was also preparing to celebrate the return of Wang Zi-teng. Her own elder brother, Wang Ren, now that his uncle was to be a Privy Councillor and in a position of such influence, was also on his way to the capital with his family. Xi-feng was glad of this. The knowledge that she would have these extra Wangs around her also gave her renewed confidence, and had a beneficial effect on her health. Lady Wang, no w that Xi-feng was up and about again, unloaded half of her responsibilities onto her, and with the reassuring prospect of having her elder brother back in the capital soon, felt more at peace.

Bao-yu was not entitled to attend any of his eldest sister's funeral ceremonies, as he held no official rank. He did no work either, and was left undisturbed in his idleness; the Preceptor attributed his state to the recent family events, while Jia Zheng was far too busy to keep a check on his son's studies. Our hero might have been expected to seize this as an ideal opportunity to amuse himself in the delightful company of his sister and cousins. But from the day he lost his jade, he just sat around all the time d9ing nothing, and if he spoke, did so in an incoherent mumble. When Grandmother Jia and the others returned from the Palace, he went over to pay his respects if told to do so; if not, he stayed where he was. All this time Aroma and his other maids grew more and more guilty and apprehensive. They dared not take him to task, for fear that he might have a tantrum. Each day he drank, his tea and ate his meals, when they were placed before him. But he would as soon have gone without.

It eventually dawned on Aroma that this was not just a mood of his, but a genuine illness. When she had a free moment, she slipped over to the Naiad's House, and had a word with Nightingale.

'If only your Mistress would talk to him, and try to cheer him up,' she said.

Nightingale passed this message on to Dai-yu straight away. But Dai-yu now saw herself as Bao-yu's future bride, and felt a need to behave towards. him with scrupulous modesty.

'If he should come to see me,' she argued with herself, 'I should have to receive him politely, for the sake of our childhood friendship. But as for going over to see him myself, that is quite out of the question.'

So she turned a deaf ear to Aroma's entreaties. Aroma next went secretly to tell Tan-chun. But Tan-chun was herself plunged in gloom. To her mind, the strange flowering of the crab-trees had been the first of a series of' ill omens, followed by the still stranger loss of the Precious Jade, and now by her sister's death. With the family fortunes so evidently on the decline, how could she find it in herself to rally Bao-yu's spirits? Besides, as brother and sister, they were obliged to maintain a certain distance. She did visit him once or twice, but he seemed indifferent to her presence and she made no further efforts.'

Bao-chai also knew of the missing jade. Her mother' had already told her of her proposed betrothal to Bao-yu, the day she discussed it with Lady Wang and all but consented.

'Although it is your Aunt Wang's proposal,' she had said to Bao-chai, 'I have still not given my final consent. I said we should have to wait until Pan comes home. What do you say to the idea? Are you willing?'

'Mother,' replied Bao-chai, in a most serious tone, 'you don't need to ask me. A daughter's future lies in her parents' hands. Since Father is dead, the decision is entirely yours. Consult Pan, if you wish, but why me?'

Aunt Xue was most touched by this display of modesty in her daughter, proof that her basically sound character had not been in any way spoiled by her luxurious upbringing. She would not mention Bao-yu's name to her again. Bao-chai for her part maintained a strict taboo from that day forth on those two syllables. So when she came to hear of the missing jade, despite the concern she felt, she refrained from inquiring any further and contented herself with what she gleaned from those around her, while maintaining a show of complete indifference.

Aunt Xue, on the other hand, sent a maid over several times to inquire after Bao-yu. She was also greatly concerned about her own son, and awaited her elder brother's arrival with impatience. His influence would surely secure Pan's release. With' the death of the Imperial Concubine, she could see how busy the Jias were. But as Xi-feng was well enough to take charge of the household management, she did not feel it necessary to visit them often.

The one to suffer most during all this was Aroma, although she tried to remain quiet and calm, and to comfort Bao-yu and minister to his needs. He seemed to understand nothing, and she could only watch over him in secret anguish.

After a few days, Yuan-chun's coffin was laid out in the Imperial Chapel 'of Rest, and Grandmother Jia and the other senior members of the family attended funeral services there for several days. Bao-yu was becoming daily more and more of an imbecile. He had no fever and was not in any physical pain, but he was eating little and sleeping less and becoming quite incoherent in his speech. Aroma, Musk and the other maids were at their wits' end, and several times went to report to Xi-feng, who came over constantly to see how he was. At first she had thought that he was simply upset that his jade had not been found. But now, seeing the deranged state into which he was sinking, she sent for the doctor. The doctor paid daily visits, and more than one kind of medicine was prescribed, but all seemed to do more harm than good. To all inquiries as to where he felt pain, he was quite unable to reply.

When Yuan-chun's funeral ceremonies were over, Grandmother Jia's thoughts turned again to Bao-yu, and she came to the Garden to visit him, accompanied by Lady Wang. Aroma told Bao-yu to go ~out and greet her properly. Bao-yu was still able to get about, and managed to greet his grandmother presentably, with

Aroma at his side prompting him at every turn.
'My dear boy!' exclaimed Grandmother Jia. 'I am so relieved! I was led to believe that you were seriously ill. But now I see that you are quite your normal self.'
Lady Wang too 'seemed pleasantly surprised. Bao-yu said nothing and gave an inane grin. They went in and sat down. When Grandmother Jia asked him a question, he could only repeat whatever Aroma said. It soon became clear to them all that so far from being his normal self, he was now little more than a halfwit. The more Grandmother Jia saw, the more it puzzled and distressed her.
'When I came in,' she said, 'he seemed quite well. But I can see now that he really is seriously ill. He seems to have quite lost his wits. Will someone please tell me what has happened?'
Lady Wang realized that they could not keep it from her any longer. For Aroma's sake, who stood there in mortal terror, she stuck to Bao-yu's story and told Grandmother Jia that he had lost his jade at the Earl of Lin-an's party, whispering it all in the old lady's ear, afraid it might come as too great a shock to her.
'The servants have been told to look everywhere,' she added. 'We have asked several fortune-tellers, and they all say that it's in a pawnshop, so it can only be a matter of time before we find it.'
Grandmother Jia rose to her feet in great agitation, tears streaming down her cheeks.
'How could he lose such a precious thing? You are not fit to look after him! What about his father? Surely he has not washed his hands of it too?'
Lady Wang could see that Grandmother Jia was in a rage. She told Aroma and the others to kneel, and herself replied, with contrite face and lowered head:
'I was afraid you would be upset,' Mother, and that his father would be angry, so I still have not told him.'
'But can't you see?' cried Grandmother Jia. 'The jade is Bao-yu's very life. Losing it is what has made him lose his wits. What *are* we going to do? People all over town have heard of the jade. If someone picks it up, he's hardly going to hand it in. Send someone at once to his father and ask him to come here. I must speak to him about this.'
Lady Wang, Aroma and all the others present were terrified of the possible consequences and entreated Grandmother Jia to relent.
'Imagine how angry Sir Zheng will be, Mother! Think of poor Bao-yu! For his sake, give us one last chance. We will search for all we are worth.'
'Why should you fear his father's wrath? I shall be here,' said the old lady firmly.
She told Musk to send someone for Jia Zheng. Minutes later, the message returned that he was out visiting a friend.
'Well, we'll go ahead without him,' said Grandmother Jia. 'For the present, none of the servants is to be punished. "Those are my instructions, and I shall take full responsibility. Send for Lian and tell him to write out a Notice of Reward, and post copies of it wherever Bao-yu went on the day he lost his jade. It is to say: "Reward for return of jade, ten thousand taels of silver. Reward for information leading to its recovery, five thousand taels." And there is to be no question of not paying up in full if someone does come forward. This is the only way we shall ever find it. If we rely on our own people, we could go on searching for the rest of our lives.'
Lady Wang did not dare voice her reservations about this plan of action. Jia Lian was sent fo'r, and told to have the posters made up with all speed.
'Move Bao-yu's things to my apartment,' Grandmother Jia ordered one of the servants. 'I shall Only need Aroma and Ripple to wait on him. The rest can stay here and look after his apartment.'
Bao-yu remained silent throughout all of this, grinning inanely. Grandmother J ia took him by the hand and led him out, Aroma and the others clustering round to support him as far as the garden gate. When they reached her apartment, Grandmother Jia told Lady Wang to sit down, and herself supervised the putting in order of the inner room. When this was done, she spoke to Lady Wang:
'You know why I have brought him over here, don't you? In the first place, there are so few people living in the garden now, and I can't help feeling there's something odd about the way those crab-trees in his courtyard died so suddenly, and then so suddenly flowered. Before now he could always rely on his jade to keep any evil influences at bay. But now that it is lost, I am afraid the evil can get in more easily. So I thought it best for him to stay here with me. He had better not go out for a few days. When the doctor comes, he can see him here.'
'Of course you are right,' said Lady Wang promptly. 'Your good luck will shelter him from any such influences, now that he is here.'
'My luck! Nothing of the sort! It is quieter here, that is all, and there are plently of sutras for him to, read, to help settle his mind. Ask him if he agrees.
When his mother put the question to him, Bao-yu merely smiled. Finally, prompted by Aroma, he

answered, ‘Yes Mother.’ Lady Wang’ was moved to tears by the pitiful spectacle her son presented, but contained herself in Grandmother Jia’s presence. Grandmother Jia could see that she was somewhat overwrought, and told her to go back to her own apartment.
‘Leave him to me. I shall look after him. When his father gets home this evening, tell him there is no need for him to come and see me today. I do not want him to know yet.’
When Lady Wang had left, Grandmother Jia told Faithful to bring her one of her sedative remedies. Bao-yu took it; and there we must leave’ them, for the’ present.

Jia Zheng, on his way home that evening, heard from within his carriage the following conversation in the street:
‘If you want to get rich, I know of an easy way...’
‘Oh? What’s that?’
‘I heard today that at Rong-guo House one of the young nobs has lost a jade, and they’ve posted a notice of reward, with all the details - shape, size, colour, etc. Ten thousand they’re offering to anyone who hands it in, and five thousand for information!’
Jia Zheng did not catch every word. But he heard enough to be considerably alarmed. He hurried home, and on arrival summoned one of the janitors and questioned him ~bout the whole affair.
‘I knew nothing of all this until today, sir,’ replied the janitor. ‘The first I heard of it was this afternoon, when Mr Lian gave us Her Old Ladyship’s orders to put the posters up.
‘We are doomed!’ said Jia Zheng to himself with a bitter sigh. ‘This son of mine is the bane of our lives! When he was a child he was the talk of the, neighbourhood. It has taken us these last ten years or more to stop their tongues, and now we have to go putting up a poster like this, announcing our troubles to the world!’
He went in without further delay and questioned Lady Wang, who told him the whole story. When he learnt that the reward was the old lady’s idea, Jia Zheng knew that he could not very well openly oppose it. He criticized Lady Wang instead for her part in it, and going out once more, gave orders for the posters to be taken down without Grandmother Jia’s knowledge. As it turned out, some local loafers had already pulled them down.
Despite this, a day or two later, a man did arrive at the main gate of Rong-guo House, claiming to have brought the jade. The servants were ecstatic. ‘Give it here!’ they cried. ‘We’ll take it in for you.
‘Not so fast!’ The man fumbled inside his gown, and brought out the reward poster. ‘Look here,’ he said, pointing to the wording on the poster. ‘This is what your masters put up, isn’t it? “Ten thousand taels for return of jade” - plain as daylight. I may be a pauper today, my man, but wait till I come into my ten thousand. You’ll sing a different tune then.’
The gateman could see he was a difficult customer.
‘Well at least give us a look, so we can go in and report.’
At first the man refused. But eventually he allowed himself to be persuaded, and producing it from within his gown, he exhibited the jade to them fleetingly on the palm of his hand, saying:
‘Isn’t this what you are looking for?’
Now these servants were all employed on external duties, and though they had heard tell of Bao-yu’s jade, had hardly ever set eyes on it. This was in fact their first opportunity of inspecting the thing at close quarters.’ This did not deter them from running into the house in a great state of excitement, racing to be the first with the news.
They found that both Jia Zheng and Jia She were out. It was Jia Lian who received their report.,
‘Is it genuine or a fake?’ he asked them sceptically.
‘I saw it with my own eyes!’ replied one of them. ‘He wouldn’t hand it over to us though, but insisted on seeing one of the masters, so that he could exchange it directly for the money.
Jia Lian could not help being infected by their enthusiasm, and went in straight away to tell Lady Wang and Grandmother Jia. Aroma, when she heard, was overjoyed, and brought ‘her hands piously together in a prayer of thanks to Lord Buddha. Grandmother Jia stood firmly by her word.
‘Tell Lian to invite him into the study at once,’ she said to Lady Wang in a’ flurry of excitement. ‘Once we have had a look at it, he will get his money straight away.’
Jia Lian did as instructed and invited the stranger in, treating him most politely and expressing profuse thanks’.
‘I should just like to let the owner have a look at it, if I may,’ he said. ‘Then you shall have your money, every pe’nny of it, I assure you.’
Reluctantly, the man handed him a little parcel wrapped in **red** silk. Jia Lian opened it. There lay a lustrous

jade. Surely this was it! Jia Lian, to tell the truth, had never taken much, notice of it while it hung round Bao-yu's neck. Now he looked closely at it for some time. The inscription was certainly familiar. He remembered some of the words, such as "dispels the harms of witchcraft". With a jubilant air, he strode in to show it to the ladies, leaving a servant to wait on the stranger.

By now the whole family had heard the news, and were gathered in Grandmother Jia's apartment, waiting eagerly, each one anxious to be the first to see. Xi-feng saw Jia Lian come in, and thrusting forward her hand, snatched the parcel from him and without looking at it herself, placed it in Grandmother Jia's hand.

'Can't you even let me take the credit for a small thing like this?' said Jia Lian with a sneer.

Grandmother Jia opened the silk bundle and examined the stone. It seemed a great deal 'duller than she remembered. She rubbed it between her fingers. Faithful brought her spectacles, and put them on for her. She examined it again.

'How peculiar! This must surely be it; and yet it seems to have lost its original lustre entirely.'

Lady Wang now inspected it. She too felt unable to identify it with any certainty, and told Xi-feng to come over and take a look.

'There is a certain similarity,' said Xi-feng after her inspection. 'But the colour is not quite right. W~ should show it to Bao-yu himself. He will be able to tell.'

Aroma was standing at her side, and had managed to have a look at the stone. Her eyes told her that it was not the one, but her heart was too full of hope to allow her to voice her misgivings. Xi-feng took the stone from Grandmother Jia's hands and went with Aroma to show it to Bao-yu, who had just awoken.

'Your stone has been found!' announced Aroma.

Bao-yu's eyes were still heavy with sleep. He took the stone in his hand, and 'without so much as a glance, let it drop to the ground.

'Why try to fool me!' he said, smiling strangely.

Xi-feng picked it up promptly.

'That's odd,' she said. 'How can you tell without even looking at it?'

Bao-yu only smiled again. Lady Wang had come in meanwhile, and observed what happened.

'It is perfectly natural,' she commented. 'That strange jade came into the world with him, it is his very own. He would be bound to know whether this was genuine or not. Someone must have read the reward-notice and faked

it.

The truth dawned on them all. Jia Lian, who heard it all from the outer room, said at once:

'If it is a fake, give it to me! I'll have it out with this impostor! How dare he play a trick on us, in such a serious matter!'

'No, Lian!' ordered Grandmother Jia. 'Give it back to him, and tell him to leave. No doubt he was desperately poor, and when he read the notice, saw a way of making a few pennies. It's understandable. Now he has been found out, and whatever it cost him to make the thing has been wasted too. Don't be too hard on him. Give him back the jade, and just say that it S not ours, and there's been a mistake. Give him a few taels of silver. If people hear that he's been well treated, it will encourage someone' with genuine information to come forward. If we treat this one harshly,. no one will bring it in even if they do find it.'

Jia Lian went as bidden. The impostor had been waiting in the study, and as time went by and no one returned, had already begun to lose his nerve. Now he saw the irate figure of Jia Lian advancing into the room. For the outcome of their subsequent interview, please read the next chapter.

CHAPTER 96

Xifeng conceives an ingenious plan of deception
And Frowner is deranged by an inadvertent disclosure

When he saw the scowl on Jia Lian's face, the impostor's heart sank. He rose nervously to greet him, but before he could say a word, Jia Lian gave a chilling laugh and silenced him with:

'Impudent fool! I should like to wring your miserable little... Do you realize who you are dealing with? How dare you play such tricks on us?'

Turning, he called for his pages. The order was echoed outside like a clap of thunder, and several pages responded in unison and presented themselves.
'Fetch a rope and bind this fellow!' order Jia Lian. 'When the Master returns, I shall report the matter and pack him off to the yamen.'
'Ready, sir!' cried the chorus of pages. But not one of them moved a muscle.
The impostor was at first immobilized with terror. But Jia Lian's hectoring, and the prospect of being taken to court, finally stirred him to action. He fell on his knees and kotowed franticaily in Jia Lian's direction, jabbering:
'Your Honour! Spare me! It was poverty f9rced me to it! I know it was ashameful thing to do. I had to borrow money to have it made, but please keep it and give it to the young master of the house with my humble compliments, to play with!'
Repeated head-knocking followed. Jia Lian spat contemptuously.
'Idiot! We certainly don't want any of your trash here!'
At this point, Lai Da came into the room.
'Do not waste your anger on this creature, sir,' he interceded, with a placatory smile. 'Spare him this once, and throw him out.'
'Why should I? The worm…'
While Jia Lian and Lai Da continued to haggle over the poor man's fate, the servants standing in the doorway offered him their advice:
'Come on, you great ninny! Kotow to Mr Lian and Mr Lai, and clear off! What are you waiting for? A kick in the stomach?'
The man was down in a flash, kotowed to Jia Lian and Lai Da, wrapped his hands round the back of his head and fled like a rat.
This episode became known in the locality as 'the case of Master Jia Bao-yu and the Counterfeit (Jia) Precious Jade (Bao-yu).

When Jia Zheng returned home that same day from a visit, no one told him what had happened in his absence. They thought that with the Lantern Festival coming up, it would be a mistake to make him angry about something that was, after all, over and done with. What with Yuan-chun's death, and their concern at Bao-yu's illness, the family was far too gloomy and preoccupied to celebrate New Year in anything but a perfunctory fashion, and it passed by without any event worthy of notice in this chronicle.
By the seventeenth of the first month, when Lady Wang was expecting her brother to arrive in the capital any day, she had an unannounced visit from Xi-feng:
'Lian has just come home with a piece of bad news, Aunt. It is about Uncle Zi-teng. He was travelling post-haste on his way to the capital, and was only seventy miles from here, when he died. Had you heard?'
'No!' exclaimed Lady Wang, aghast. 'Sir Zheng didn't mention anything of the sort yesterday evening. Where did Lian hear this?'
'At the home of Excellency Zhang from the Privy Council.'
Lady Wang stared in silence. Tears started from her eyes. Wiping them away, she finally said:
'Go and tell Lian to get confirmation of the news, and to see me as soon as he has.'
Xi-feng departed as bidden. Left on her own, Lady Wang gave way to her tears. A brother and daughter dead, a son deranged - she could contain her burden of grief and anxiety no longer. She began to feel a pain in her chest. And here was Jia Lian to confirm the story:
'Uncle was exhausted by the strain of the journey, and caught a chill. They were at Ten Mile Village when this happened. A doctor was called, but the only one available in such a remote spot turned out to be incompetent. He prescribed the wrong drugs, and the first dose proved fatal. Uncle's own family have set out for the place already, but I do not know if they have arrived yet.'
These details touched Lady Wang to the quick, and the pain in her chest became so severe that she could no longer sit upright. She told Suncloud to help her onto the kang, and struggling to keep a grip on herself, told Jia Lian to report at once to Jia Zheng.
'Pack your things as quickly as you can, and go straight there to join the family and help them with the funeral arrangements. Come back as soon as possible and let us know how things stand. I know Xi-feng will not set her mind at rest until you are back.'
Jia Lian could see that it would be inappropriate to raise any objections. He took his leave of Jia Zheng, and set out for Ten Mile Village.
Jia Zheng had learned the news of Wang Zi-teng's death independently. Depressed already by the moronic

decline into which his son had fallen since the loss of his jade, a condition no doctor seemed- able to cure, he responded with extreme gloom to this latest blow and to Lady Wang's attack following upon it. The time had come round for the triennial review of civil servants stationed in the capital. Jia Zheng's Board gave him a high commendation, and in the second month the Board of Civil Office presented him for an audience with the Emperor. His Majesty, in view of Jia Zheng's record as a 'diligent, frugal, conscientious and prudent servant of the Throne', appointed him immediately to the post of Grain Intendant for the province of Kiangsi. The same day, Jia Zheng offered his humble acceptance and gratitude for the honour, and suggested a day for his departure. Friends and relatives were all eager to celebrate, but he was not in festive mood. He was loth to leave the capital at a time when things were so unsettled at home, although at the same time he knew that he could not delay his departure.

He was pondering this dilemma, when a message came to summon him to Grandmother Jia's presence. He made his way promptly to her apartment, where he found Lady Wang also present, despite her illness. He paid his respects to Grandmother Jia, who told him to be seated and then began:

'In a few days, you will be leaving us to take up your post. There is something I should like to discuss with you, if you are willing.'

The old lady's eyes were wet with tears. Jia Zheng rose swiftly to his feet, and said:

'Whatever you have to say, Mother, please speak: your word is my command.'

'I shall be eighty-one this year;' said Grandmother Jia, sobbing as she spoke. 'You are going away to a post in the provinces, and with your elder brother still at home, you will not be able to apply for early retirement to come and look after me. When you are gone, of the ones closest to my heart I shall only have Bao-yu left to me. And he, poor darling, is in such a wretched state, I don't know what we can do for him! The other day I sent out Lai Sheng's wife to have the boy's fortune told. The man's reading was uncanny. What he said was: "This person must marry a lady with a destiny of gold, to help him and support him. He must be given a marriage as soon as possible to turn his luck. If not, he may not live." Now I know you don't believe in such things, which is why I sent for you, to talk it over with you. You and his mother must discuss it among yourselves. Are we to save him, or are we to do nothing and watch him fade away?'

Jia Zheng smiled anxiously.

'Could I, who as a child received such tender love and care from you, Mother, not have fatherly feelings myself? It is just that I have been exasperated by his repeated failure to make progress in his studies, and have perhaps been too ambitious for him. You are perfectly right in wanting to see him married. How could I possibly wish to oppose you? I am concerned for the boy, and his recent illness has caused me great anxiety. But as you have kept him from me, I have not ventured to say anything. I should like to see him now for myself, and form my own impression of his condition.'

Lady Wang saw that his eyes were moist, and knew that he was genuinely concerned. She told Aroma to fetch Bao-yu and help him into the room. He walked in, and when Aroma told him to pay his respects to his father, did exactly as she said. Jia Zheng saw how emaciated his face had grown, how lifeless his eyes were. His son was like some pathetic simpleton. He told them to take him back to his room.

'I shall soon be sixty myself,' he mused. 'With this provincial posting, it is difficult to tell how many years it will be before I return. If anything were to happen to Bao-yu, I should be left without an heir in my old age. I have a grandson, but that is not the same. And then Bao-yu is the old lady's favourite. If anything untoward occurred, I should be still more deeply at fault.'

He glanced at Lady Wang. Her face was wet with tears. He thought of the sorrow it would cause her too, and stood up again to speak.

'If, from your wealth of experience, you have thought of a way to help him, Mother, then how could I possibly raise any objection? We should do whatever you think is best. But has Mrs Xue been informed?'

'My sister has already expressed her agreement,' replied Lady Wang. 'We have only been biding our time because Pan's court-case has still not been settled.'

'Yes, that is certainly the first obstacle,' commented Jia Zheng. 'How can a girl be given in marriage while her elder brother is in jail? And besides there is Her Grace's death. Although that does not strictly entail any such prohibition, Bao-yu should at least abide by the set term of mourning for a deceased elder sister, which would mean a period 6f nine months during which marriage would be highly irregular. And then, my own date of departure has already been reported to the throne, and I cannot postpone it now. That only leaves us a few days. There is not enough time.'

Grandmother Jia pondered her son's words. 'What he says is true,' she thought to herself. 'If we wait for all of these conditions to be fulfilled, his father will have left, and who knows to what state the boy's health may deteriorate. And then it may be too late. We shall have to put aside the rules for once. There is no other way.'

Having reached this conclusion in her own mind, she spoke to Jia Zheng again.
'If you will agree to this for him, I shall take care of any problems that may arise. There is nothing that cannot be ironed out, of that I am confident. His mother and I shall go over and put the matter personally to Mrs Xue. As for Pan, I shall ask young Ke to go to him and explain that we are doing this to save Bao-yu's life. When he knows the reason, I am sure he will agree. As for marrying during a period of mourning, strictly speaking one shouldn't, I know. And besides, it is not right for him to marry while lie is so ill. But it's a question of turning his luck. Both families are willing, and as the children have the bond of gold and jade to justify their union, we can dispense with the usual reading of horoscopes. We just need to choose an auspicious day to exchange presents in proper style, and then set a date for the wedding itself, possible afterwards. No music during the wedding itself, but otherwise we can follow court practice: twelve pairs of long-handled lanterns and an eight-man palanquin for the bride. We shall have the ceremony in our southern form, and keep our old customs of throwing dried fruit onto the bridal bed and so forth. That will be enough to make it quite a proper wedding. Bao-chai is a sensible girl. We need not worry on her account. And Aroma is a very reliable person. We can count on her to have a calming influence on Bao-yu. She gets on well with Bao-chai too.
'One other thing:. Mrs Xue once told us that a monk said Bao-chai should only marry someone with a jade to match her golden locket. Perhaps when she comes to live as Bao-yu's wife, her locket will draw the jade back. Once they are married, things will look up and the whole family will benefit. So, we must prepare a courtyard and decorate it nicely - I should like you to choose it. We shan't be inviting any friends or relations to the wedding, and we can have the party later, when Bao-yu is better and the mourning period is over. This way, everything will be done in time, and you will be able to see the young people married and set off with an easy mind.'
Jia Zheng had grave doubts about the proposal. But as it was Grandmother Jia's, he knew he~ could not go against it. He smiled dutifully, and hastened to reply:
'You have thought it all out very well, Mother, and have taken everything into account. We must tell the servants not to go talking about this to everyone they meet. It would hardly redound to our credit if people knew. And personally I doubt if Mrs Xue will agree to the idea. But if she does, then I suppose we should do as you suggest.'
'You need not worry about Mrs Xue,' said the old lady. 'I can explain things to her. Off you go then.'
Jia Zheng took his leave. He felt extremely uneasy about the whole idea. Official business soon engulfed him, however - acceptance of his new papers of appointment.. recommendations of staff from friends and relatives, an endless round of social gatherings of one sort or another
and he delegated all responsibility for the marriage plans to Grandmother J ia, who in turn left the arrangements to Lady Wang and Xi-feng. Jia Zheng's only contributioh was to designate a twenty-frame building in a courtyard behind the Hall of Exalted Felicity, to 'he side of Lady Wang's private apartment, as Bao-yu's new home. Grandmother Jia's mind was now quite made up, and when she sent someone to communicate this to Jia Zheng he just replied: 'Very well.' But of this, more later.

Bao-yu, after his brief interview with his father, was escorted back by Aroma to his kang in the inner room. Intimidated by the Master's presence in the next room, none of the maids dared speak to him and he soon fell into a deep sleep. As a consequence he did not hear a word of the conversation between his father and Grandmother J ia. Aroma and the others did, however, and stood in complete silence taking it all in. Aroma had heard rumours of this marriage-plan, rumours whose. likelihood, it is true, had been strengthened by Bao-chai's repeated absence from family gatherings. Now that she knew it for a fact, all became crystal clear. She was glad.
'They've shown some sense at last!' she thought to herself, 'Those two will make by far the better match. And I shall be better off too. With Miss Chai here I'll be able to unload a lot of my responsibilities. The only trouble is, Master Bao still thinks of no one but Miss Li.... It's a good thing he didn't hear just now. If he knew what they are planning, I dread to think what trouble we'd have.'
This cast a shadow over her previous optimism. 'What's to be done?' she continued to brood to herself. 'Her Old Ladyship and Her Ladyship obviously don't know about the secret feelings Master Bao and Miss Lin have for each other, and in their enthusiasm they could tell him their plan, to try and cure him. But if he still feels as he did -when he first saw Miss Lin, for instance, and hurled his jade to the ground and wanted to smash it to pieces; or last summer in the Garden, when he mistook me for her and poured his heart out to me; or when Nightingale teased him by saying that Miss Lin was going away, and had him in such floods of tears - and if they go and tell him now that he's betrothed to Miss Chai and will have to give

Miss Lin up for ever, so far from turning his luck they'll probably kill him! (Unless of course he's going through one of his deaf-and-dumb spells, in which case he probably won't even nonce.) I'd better tell them what I know, or three people may suffer!'
Aroma's mind was made up. As soon as Jia Zheng had taken hi& leave of the ladies, she left Ripple to look after Bao-yu, and went into the outer room. She walked over to Lady Wang and whispered that she would like a word with her privately in the room to the rear of Grandmother J ia's apartment. Grandmother Jia imagined it to be some message from Bao-yu and did not pay much attention, but continued to engross herself in the wedding arrangements. Lady Wang rose to leave, and Aroma followed her into the rear chamber, where she at once fell on her knees and began crying. Lady Wang had no idea what it was all about, and taking her by the hand, said:
'Come now! What is all this? Has someone done you wrong? If so, stand up, and tell me.'
'It is something I shouldn't really say, but in the circumstances I feel I must.'
'Well, tell me then. And take your time.'
'You and Her Old Ladyship have made an excellent decision, in choosing Miss Bao-chai as Bao-yu's future bride ...' began Aroma. 'But, I wonder, ma'am, if you have
noticed which of the two young ladies Bao-yu is more closely attached to, Miss Chai, or Miss Lin?'
'As they have lived together since they were children,' replied Lady Wang, 'I suppose he would be a little closer to Miss Lin.'
'More than a little!' protested Aroma, and went on to give Lady Wang a detailed history of how things had always stood between Bao-yu and Dai-yu, and of the various incidents that had occurred between them.
'These are all things that you would have seen for yourself, ma'am,' she added, 'with the exception of his outburst during the summer, which I have not mentioned to a soul until now.'
Lady Wang drew Aroma towards her.
'Yes, most of what you have told me I have been able to deduce for myself. What you have said simply bears out my own observations. But you must all have heard the Master's words. Tell me, how did Bao-yu react?'
'As things are at present, ma'am, Bao-yu smiles if someone talks to him, but otherwise he just sleeps. He heard nothing.'
'In that case, what are we to do?'
'It is not my place to say,' replied Aroma. 'Your Ladyship should inform Her Old Ladyship of what I have said, and think of a suitable way of solving the problem.'
'Then you had better go,' said Lady Wang, 'and leave it to me. Now would not be a good moment to bring it up; there are too many people in the room. I shall wait for an opportunity to tell Her Old Ladyship, and we will discuss what to do.'
Lady Wang returned to Grandmother Jia's apartment. The old lady was talking to Xi-feng, and when she saw Lady Wang come in, asked:
'What did Aroma want? What was all that mysterious whispering about?'
Lady Wang answered her directly, and told the whole story of Bao-yu's love for Dai-yu, as Aroma had told it her. When she had finished, Grandmother Jia was silent for a long while. Neither Lady Wang nor Xi-feng dared say a word. At last, Grandmother Jia sighed and said:
'Everything else seemed somehow soluble. It does not matter so much about Dai-yu. But if Bao-yu really feels this way about her, it seems we have run into an insoluble problem.'
Xi-feng looked very thoughtful for a minute, then said:
'Not insoluble. I think I can see a solution. But I am not sure if you would agree to it or not, Aunt.'
'Whatever your idea is,' said Lady Wang, 'speak up and let Mother know. Then we can all discuss it together.'
'There is only one solution that I can think of,' said Xifeng. 'It involves two things: a white lie, and a piece of discreet substitution.'
'Substitution? What do you mean?' asked Grandmother Jia.
'First of all,' replied Xi-feng, 'whether Bao-yu knows anything yet or not, we let it be known that Sir Zheng proposes to betroth him to Miss Lin. We must watch for his reaction. If he is quite unaffected, then there is no need to bother with my plan. But if he does seem at all pleased at the news, it will make things rather more complicated.'
'Supposing he is pleased?' asked Lady Wang. 'What then?'
Xi-feng went over and whispered at some length in Lady Wang's ear. Lady Wang nodded, smiled and said:
'Well, well... An ingenious idea, I must say!'

‘Come on, you two!’ exclaimed Grandmother Jia. ‘Let me in on the secret: what are you whispering about?’
Xi-feng was afraid that Grandmother J ia might not grasp her idea at once, and might inadvertently give the game away. She leant across and whispered in the old lady’s ear. Grandmother Jia did seem rather puzzled at
first. Xi-feng smiled, and added a few more words of explanation. Grandmother Jia finally said with a smile:
‘Why not? But isn’t it rather hard on Bao-chai? And what about Miss Lin? What if she gets to hear of it?’
‘We shall only tell Bao-yu’ replied Xi-feng. ‘No one else will be allowed to mention it. That way no one need know.’
A maid came in and informed them that Mr Lian had returned. Lady Wang was worried that Grandmother Jia might inquire into the distressing news that had occasioned his journey, and cast a meaningful glance in Xifeng’s direction. Xi-feng went out to intercept him, and signalled to him with her lips to accompany her to Lady Wang’s apartment and wait there. It was not long before Lady Wang came in, to find Xi-feng red-eyed from weeping. Jia Lian paid his respects to Lady Wang, and gave her an account of the funeral arrangements for Wang Zi-teng at Ten Mile Village.
‘He has been posthumously awarded the rank of Grand Secretary, by Imperial Decree,’ Jia Lian went on, ‘and the title Lord Wen-qin. The Court has given instructions for the family to accompany the coffin *en cortege* to Nanking, and all local mandarins have been instructed to look after them en route. The whole family left yesterday for the South. Uncle’s widow asked me to convey her respects. She said that there was so much she wanted to talk to you about, but that she would not be able to come to the capital at present. My brother-in-law Wang Ren is coming here, so I heard, and if they meet him on the way, they will tell him to come and give us the latest news.’
Lady Wang responded to all of this with a grief that the reader can surely imagine.
‘Why don’t you lie down for a while, Aunt?’ said Xi-feng. ‘In the evening, we can talk further about Bao-yu’s affairs.’
Having uttered these comforting words, Xi-feng returned with Jia Lian to her own apartment, where she informed him of all that had been decided and told him to give instructions for the cleaning and refurbishing of the courtyard that was to be the couple’s new home. But of this no more for the present.
*

A day or two after these events, Dai-yu, having eaten her breakfast, decided to take Nightingale with her to visit Grandmother Jia. She wanted to pay her respects, and also thought the visit might provide some sort of distraction for herself. She had hardly left the Naiad’s House, when she remembered that she had left her handkerchief at home, and sent Nightingale back to fetch it, saying that she would walk ahead slowly and wait for her to catch up. She had just reached the corner behind the rockery at Drenched Blossoms Bridge - the very spot where she had once buried the flowers with Bao-yu - when all of a sudden she heard the sound of sobbing. She stopped at once and listened. She could not tell whose voice it was, nor could she distinguish what it was that the voice was complaining of, so tearfully and at such length. It really was most puzzling. She moved forward again cautiously and as she turned the corner, saw before her the source of the sobbing, a maid with large eyes and thick-set eyebrows.
Before setting eyes on this girl, Dai-yu had guessed that one of the many maids in the Jia household must have had an unhappy. love-affair, and had come here to cry her heart out in secret. But now she laughed at the very idea. ‘How could such an ungainly creature as this know the meaning of love?’ she thought to herself. ‘This must be one of the odd-job girls, who has probably been scolded by one of the senior maids.’
She looked more closely, but still could not place the girl. Seeing Dai-yu, the maid ceased her weeping, wiped her cheeks, and rose to her feet.
‘Come now, what are you so upset about?’ inquired Dai-yu.
‘Oh Miss Lin!’ replied the maid, amid fresh tears. ‘Tell me if you think it fair. *They* were talking about it, and how was I to know better? Just because I say one thing wrong, is that a reason for sister to start hitting me?’
Dai-yu did not know what she was talking about. She smiled, and asked again:
‘Who is your sister?’
‘Pearl,’ answered the maid.
From this, Dai-yu concluded that she must work in Grandmother Jia’s apartment.
‘And what is your name?’
‘Simple.’

Dai-yu laughed. Then:
‘Why did she hit you? What did you say that was so wrong?’
‘That’s what I’d like to know! It was only to do with Master Bao marrying Miss Chai!’
The words struck Dai-yu’s ears like a clap of thunder. Her heart started thumping fiercely. She tried to calm herself for a moment, and told the maid to come with her. The maid followed her to the secluded corner of the garden, where the Flower Burial Mound was situated. Here Dai-yu asked her:
‘Why should she hit you for mentioning Master Bao’s marriage to Miss Chai?’
‘Her Old Ladyship, Her Ladyship and Mrs Lian,’ replied Simple, ‘have decided that as the Master is leaving soon, they are going to arrange with Mrs Xue to marry Master Bao and Miss Chai as uickly as possible. They want the wedding to turn his luck, and then...’
Her voice tailed off. She stared at Dai-yu, laughed and continued:
‘Then, as soon as those two are married, they are going to find a husband for you, Miss Lin.’
Dai-yu was speechless with horror. The maid went on regardless:
‘But how was I to know that they’d decided to keep it quiet, for fear of embarrassing Miss Chai? All I did was say to Aroma, that serves in Master Bao’s room: "Won’t it be a fine to-do here soon, when Miss Chai comes over, or Mrs Bao... what *will* we have to call her?” That’s all I said. What was there in that to hurt sister Pearl? Can *you* see, Miss Lin? She came across and hit me straight in the face and said I was talking rubbish and disobeying orders, and would be dismissed from service! How was I to know their Ladyships didn’t want us to mention it? Nobody told me, and she just hit me!’
She started sobbing again. Dai-yu’s heart felt as though oil, soy-sauce, sugar and vinegar had all been poured into it at once. She could not tell which flavour predominated, the sweet, the sour, the bitter or the salty. After a few moments’ silence, she said in a trembling voice:
‘Don’t talk such rubbish. Any more of that, and you’ll be beaten again. Off you go!’
She herself turned back in the direction of the Naiad’s House. Her body felt as though it weighed a hundred tons, her feet were as wobbly as if she were walking on cotton-floss. She could only manage one step at a time. After an age, she still had not reached the bank by Drenched Blossoms Bridge. She was going so slowly, with her feet about to collapse beneath her, and in her giddiness and confusion had wandered off course and increased the distance by about a hundred yards. She reached Drenched Blossoms Bridge only to start drifting back again along the bank in the direction she ha4 just come from, quite unaware of what she was doing.
Nightingale had by now returned with the handkerchief, but could not find Dai-yu anywhere. She finally saw her, pale as snow, tottering along, her eyes staring straight in front of her, meandering in circles. Nightingale also caught sight of a maid disappearing in the distance beyond Dai-yu, but could not make out who it was. She was most bewildered, and quickened her step.
‘Why are you turning back again, Miss?’ she asked softly. ‘Where are you heading for?’
Dai-yu only heard the blurred outline of this question. She replied:
‘I want to ask Bao-yu something.’
Nightingale could not fathom what was going on, and could only try to guide her on her way to Grandmother Jia’s apartment. When they came to the entrance, Dai-yu seemed to feel clearer in mind. She turned, saw Nightingale supporting her, stopped for a moment, and asked:
‘What are you doing here?’
‘I went to fetch your handkerchief,’ replied Nightingale, smiling anxiously. ‘I saw you over by the bridge and hurried across. I asked you where you were going, but you took no notice.’
‘Oh!’ said Dai-yu with a smile. ‘I thought you had come to see Bao-yu. What else did we come here for?’
Nightingale could see that her mind was utterly confused. She guessed that it was something that the maid had said in the garden, and only nodded with a faint smile in reply to Dai-yu’s question. But to herself she was trying to imagine what sort of an encounter this was going to be, between the young master who had already lost his wits, and her young mistress who was now herself a little touched. Despite her apprehensions, she dared not prevent the meeting, and helped Dai-yu into the room. The funny thing was that Dai-yu now seemed to have recovered her strength. She did not wait for Nightingale but raised the portiere herself, and walked into the room. It was very quiet inside. Grandmother Jia had retired for her afternoon nap. Some of the maids had sneaked off to play, some were having forty winks themselves and others had gone to wait on Grandmother Jia in her bedroom. It was Aroma who came out to see who was there, when she heard the swish of the portiere. Seeing that it was Dai-yu, she greeted her politely:
‘Please come in and sit down, Miss.’
‘Is Master Bao at home?’ asked Dai-yu with a smile.
Aroma did not know that anything was amiss, and was about to answer, when she saw Nightingale make

an urgent movement with her lip from behind Dai-yu's back, pointing to her mistress and making a warning gesture with her hand. Aroma had no idea what she meant and dared not ask. Undeterred, Dai-yu walked on into Baoyu's room. He was sitting up in bed, and when she came in made no move to get up or welcome her, but remained where he was, staring at her and giving a series of silly laughs. Dai-yu sat down uninvited, and she too began to smile and stare back at Bao-yu. There were no greetings exchanged, no courtesies, in fact no words of any kind. They just sat there staring into each other's faces and smiling like a pair of half-wits. Aroma stood watching, completely at a loss.

Suddenly Dai-yu said:

'Bao-yu, why are you sick?'

Bao-yu laughed.

'I'm sick because of Miss Lin.'

Aroma and Nightingale grew pale with fright. They tried t6 change the subject, but their efforts only met with silence and more senseless smiles. By now it was clear to Aroma that Dai-yu's mind was as disturbed as Bao-yu's.

'Miss Lin has only just recovered from her illness,' she whispered to Nightingale. 'I'll ask Ripple to help you take her back. She should go home and lie down.' Turning to Ripple, she said: 'Go with Nightingale and accompany Miss Lin home. And no stupid chattering on the way, mind.'

Ripple smiled, and without a word came over to help Nightingale. The two of them began to help Dai-yu to her feet. Dai-yu stood up at once, unassisted, still staring fixedly at Bao-yu, smiling and nodding her head.

'Come on, Miss!' urged Nightingale. 'It's time to go home and rest.'

'Of course!' exclaimed Dai-yu. 'It's time!'

She turned to go. Still smiling and refusing any assistance. from the maids, she strode out at twice her normal speed. Ripple and Nightingale hurried after her. On leaving Grandmother Jia's apartment, Dai-yu kept on walking, in quite the wrong direction. Nightingale hurried up to her and took her by the hand.

'This is the way, Miss.'

Still smiling, Dai-yu allowed herself to be led, and followed Nightingale towards the Naiad's House. When they were nearly there, Nightingale exclaimed:

'Lord Buddha be praised! Home at last!'

She had no sooner uttered these words when she saw Dai-yu stumble forwards onto the ground, and give a loud cry. A stream of blood came gushing from her mouth.

To learn if she survived this crisis, please read the next chapter.

CHAPTER 97

Lin Dai-yu burns her poems
to signal the end of her heart's folly
And Xue Bao-chai leaves home
to take part in a solemn rite

We have seen how Dai-yu, on reaching the entrance of the Naiad's House, and on hearing Nightingale's cry of relief, slumped forward, vomited blood and almost fainted. Luckily Nightingale and Ripple were both at hand to assist her into the house. When Ripple left, Nightingale and Snowgoose stood by Dai-yu's bedside and watched her gradually come round.

'Why are you two standing round me crying?' asked Dai-yu, and Nightingale, greatly reassured to hear her talking sense again, replied:

'On your way back from Her Old Ladyship's,' Miss, you had quite a nasty turn. We were scared and did not know what to do. That's why we were crying.'

'I am not going to die yet!' said Dai-yu, with a bitter smile. But before she could even finish this sentence, she was doubled up and gasping for breath once more.

When she had learned earlier that day that Bao-yu and Bao-chai were to be married, the shock of knowing

that what she had feared for so long was now about to come true, had thrown her into such a turmoil that at first she had quite taken leave of her senses. Now that she had brought up the blood, her mind gradually became clearer. Though at first she could remember nothing, when she saw Nightingale crying, Simple's words slowly came back to her. This time she did not succumb to her emotions, but set her heart instead on a speedy death and final settlement of her debt with fate.

Nightingale and Snowgoose could only stand by helplessly. They would have gone to inform the ladies, but were afraid of a repetition of the last occasion, when Xifeng had rebuked them for creating a false alarm. Ripple had already given all away, however, by the look of horror on her face when she returned to Grandmother Jia's apartment. The old lady, who had just risen from her midday nap, asked her what the matter was, and in her shocked state Ripple told her all that she had just witnessed.

'What a terrible thing!' exclaimed Grandmother Jia, aghast. She sent for Lady Wang and Xi-feng at once, and told them both the news.

'But I gave instructions to everyone to observe strict secrecy,' said Xi-feng. 'Who can have betrayed us? Now we have another problem on our hands.'

'Never mind that for the moment,' said Grandmother Jia. 'We must first find out how she is.'

She took Lady Wang and Xi-feng with her to visit Daiyu, and they arrived to find her barely conscious, breathing in faint little gasps, her face bloodless and white as snow. After a while she coughed again. A maid brought the spittoon and they watched with horror as she spat out a mouthful of blood and phlegm. Dai-yu faintly opened her eyes, and seeing Grandmother Jia standing at her bedside, struggled to find breath to speak.

'Grandmother! Your love for me has been in vain.

Grandmother Jia was most distraught.

'There now, my dear, you must rest. There is nothing to fear.'

Dai-yu smiled faintly and closed her eyes again. A maid came in to tell Xi-feng that the doctor had arrived. The ladies withdrew, and doctor Wang came in with Jia Lian. He took Dai-yu's pulses, and said:

'As yet, there is no cause for alarm. An obstruction of morbid humours has affected the. liver, which is unable to store the blood, and as a consequence her spirit has been disturbed. I shall prescribe a medicine to check the Yin, and to halt the flow of blood. I think all will be well.'

Doctor Wang left the room, accompanied by Jia Lian, to write out his prescription.

Grandmother Jia could tell that this time Dai-yu was seriously ill, and as they left the room, she said to Lady Wang and Xi-feng:

'I do not wish to sound gloomy or bring her bad luck, but I fear she has small hope of recovery, poor child. You must make ready her grave-clothes and coffin. Who knows, such preparations may even turn her luck. She may recover, which will be a mercy for us all. But it would be sensible anyway to be prepared for the worst, and not be taken unawares. We shall be so busy over the next few days.'

Xi-feng said she would make the necessary arrangements. Grandmother Jia then questioned Nightingale, but she had no idea who it was that had upset Dai-yu. The more she thought about it, the more it puzzled Grandmother Jia, and she said to Xi-feng and Lady Wang:

'I can understand that the two of them should have grown rather fond of one another, after growing up together and playing together as children. But now that they are older and more mature, the time has come for them to observe a certain distance. She must behave properly, if she is to earn my love. It's quite wrong of her to think she can disregard such things. Then all my love *will* have been in vain! What you have told me troubles me.'

She returned to her apartment and sent for Aroma again. Aroma repeated to her all that she had told Lady Wang on the previous occasion, and in addition described the scene earlier that day between Dai-yu and Bao-yu.

'And yet, when I saw her just now,' said Grandmother Jia, 'she still seemed able to talk sense. I simply cannot understand it. Ours is a decent family. We do not tolerate unseemly goings-on. And that applies to foolish romantic attachments. If her illness is of a respectable nature, I do not mind how much we have to spend to get her better. But if she is suffering from some form of lovesickness, no amount of medicine will cure it and she can expect no further sympathy from me either.'

'You really shouldn't worry about Cousin Lin, Grandmother,' said Xi-feng. 'Lian will be visiting her regularly with the doctor. We must concentrate on the wedding arrangements. Early this morning I heard that the finishing touches were being put to the bridal courtyard. You and Aunt Wang and I should go over to Aunt Xue's for a final consultation. There is one thing that occurs to me, however: with Bao-chai there, it will be rather awkward for us to discuss the wedding. Maybe we should ask Aunt Xue to come over here tomorrow evening, and then we can settle everything at once.

Grandmother J ia and Lady Wang agreed that her proposal was a good one, and said:
'It is too late today. Tomorrow after lunch, let us all go over together.'
Grandmother Jia's dinner was now served, and Xi-feng and Lady Wang returned to their apartments.

Next day, Xi-feng came over after breakfast. Wishing to sound out Bao-yu according to her plan, she advanced into his room and said:
'Congratulations, Cousin Bao! Uncle Zheng has already chosen a lucky day for your wedding! Isn't that good news?'
Bao-yu stared at her with a blank smile, and nodded his head faintly.
'He is marrying you,' went on Xi-feng, with a studied smile, 'to your cousin Lin. Are you happy?'
Bao-yu burst out laughing. Xi-feng watched him carely, but could not make out whether he had understood her, or was simply raving. She went on:
'Uncle Zheng says, you are to marry Miss Lin, if you get better. But not if you carry on behaving like a half-wit.'

Bao-yu's expression suddenly changed to one of utter seriousness, as he said:
'I'm not a half-wit. You're the half-wit.'
He stood up.
'I am going to see Cousin Lin, to set her mind at rest.'
Xi-feng quickly put out a hand to stop him.
'She knows already. And, as your bride-to-be, she would be much too embarrassed to receive you now.
'What about when we're married? Will she see me then?'
Xi-feng found this both comic and somewhat disturbing.
'Aroma was right,' she thought to herself. 'Mention Dai-yu, and while he still talks like an idiot, he at least seems to understand what's going on. I can see we shall be in real trouble, if he sees through our scheme and finds out that his bride is not to be Dai-yu after all.'
In reply to his question, she said, suppressing a smile:
'If you behave, she will see you. But not if you continue to act like an imbecile.'
To which Bao-yu replied:
'I have given my heart to Cousin Lin. If she marries me, she will bring it with her and put it back in its proper place.'
Now this was madman's talk if ever, thought Xi-feng. She left him, and walked back into the outer room, glancing with a smile in Grandmother Jia's direction. The old lady too found Bao-yu's words~both funny and distressing.
'I heard you both myself,' she said to Xi-feng. 'For the present, we must ignore it. Tell Aroma to do her best to calm him down. Come, let us go.
Lady Wang joined them, and the three ladies went across to Aunt Xue's. On arrival there, they pretended to be concerned about the course of Xue Pan's affair. Aunt Xue expressed her profound gratitude for this concern, and gave them the latest news. After they had all taken tea, Aunt Xue was about to send for Bao-chai, when Xifeng stopped her, saying:
'There is no need to tell Cousin Chai that we are here, Auntie.'
With a diplomatic smile, she continued:
'Grandmother's visit today is not purely a social one. She has something of importance to say, and would like you t6 come over later so that we can all discuss it together.'
Aunt Xue nodded.
'Of course.'
After a little more chat, the three ladies returned.
That evening Aunt Xue came over as arranged, and after paying her respects to Grandmother Jia, went to her sister's apartment. First there was the inevitable scene of sisterly commiseration over Wang Zi-teng's death. Then Aunt Xue said:
'Just now when I was at Lady Jia's, young Bao came out to greet' me and seemed quite well. A little thin perhaps, but certainly not as ill as I had been led to expect from your description and Xi-feng's.'
'No, it is really not that serious,' said Xi-feng. 'It's only Grandmother who will worry so. Her idea is that it would be reassuring for Sir Zheng to see Bao-yu married before he leaves, as who knows when he will be able to come home from his new posting. And then from Bao-yu's own point of view, it might be just the thing to turn his luck. With Cousin Chai's golden locket to counteract the evil influence, he should make a good recovery.'

Aunt Xue was willing enough to go along with the idea, but was concerned that Bao-chai might feel rather hard done by.

'I see nothing against it,' she said. 'But I think we should all take time to think it over properly.'

In accordance with Xi-feng's plan, Lady Wang went on:

'As you have no head of family present, we should like you to dispense with the usual trousseau. Tomorrow you should send Ke to let Pan know that while we proceed with the wedding, we shall continue to do our utmost to settle his court-case.'

She made no mention of Bao-yu's feelings for Dai-yu, but continued:

'Since you have given your consent, the sooner they are married, the sooner things will look up for everyone.

At this point, Faithful came in to take back a report to Grandmother Jia. Though Aunt Xue was still concerned about Bao-chai's feelings, she saw that in the circumstances she had no choice, and agreed to everything they had suggested. Faithful reported this to Grandmother Jia, who was delighted and sent her back again to ask Mrs Xue to explain to Bao-chai why it was that things were being done in this way, so that she would not feel unfairly treated. Aunt Xue agreed to do this, and it was settled that Xi-feng and Jia Lian would act as official go-betweens. Xi-feng retired to her apartment, while Aunt Xue and Lady Wang stayed up talking together well into the night.

Next day, Aunt Xue returned to her apartment and told Bao-chai the details of the proposal, adding:

'I have already given my consent.'

At first Bao-chai hung her head in silence. Then she began to cry. Aunt Xue said all that she could jo comfort her, and went to great lengths to explain the reasoning behind the decision. Bao-chai retired to her room, and Baoqin went in to keep her company and cheer her up. Aunt Xue also spoke to Ke, instructing him as follows:

'You must leave tomorrow. Find out the latest news of Pan's judgement, and then convey this message to him. Return as soon as you possibly can.

Xue Ke was away for four days, at the end of which time he returned to report to Aunt Xue.

'The Circuit Judge has ratified the verdict of manslaughter, and after the next hearing his final memorial will be presented to the Provincial Supreme Court for confirmation. We should have the commutation money ready. As for Cousin Chai's affair, Cousin Pan approves entirely of your decision, Aunt. And he says that curtailing the formalities will save us a lot of money too. You are not to wait for him, but should do whatever you think best.'

Aunt Xue's mind was greatly eased by the knowledge that Xue Pan would soon be free to come home, and that there were now no further obstacles to the marriage. She could see that Bao-chai was unwilling to be married in this way, but reasoned with herself: 'Even if this is not what she ideally wants, she is my daughter and has always been obedient and well-bred. She knows I have agreed to it, and will not go against my wishes.'

She instructed Xue Ke:

'We must prepare the betrothal-card. Take some fine gold-splash paper and write on it the Stems and Branches of Bao-chai's birth. Then take it to Cousin Lian. Find out which day has been fixed for the exchange of presents, and make all the necessary preparations for sending ours. We shall not be inviting any friends or relatives to the wedding. Pan's friends are a worthless lot, as you yourself said, while our relations consist mainly of the Jias and the Wangs. The Jias are groom's family, and there are no Wangs in the capital at present. When Xiang-yun was engaged, the Shis did not invite us, so we need not get in touch with them. The only person I think we should invite is our business manager, Zhang De-hui. He is an older man and experienced in such things, and will be a; help to us.'

Xue Ke carried out these instructions, and sent a servant over with the betrothal-card. Next day, Jia Lian came to visit Aunt Xue. After paying his respects, he said:

'I have consulted the almanac, and tomorrow is a most propitious day. I have come here today to propose that our two families exchange presents tomorrow. And please, Aunt Xue, do not be too critical about the arrangements.'

He presented the groom's notice, which bore the date of the wedding. Aunt Xue said a few polite words of acceptance and nodded her assent. Jia Lian returned at once and reported to Jia Zheng.

'Report to your Grandmother,' said Jia Zheng, 'and say that as we are not inviting anybody, the wedding should be kept very simple. She can exercise her discretion over the presents. There is no need to consult me any further.'

Jia Lian bowed, and went in to convey this message to Grandmother Jia. Meanwhile Lady Wang had told Xi-feng to bring in the presents that were being given on Bao-yu's behalf, for Grandmother Jia's

inspection. She also told Aroma to bring Bao-yu in to see them. He seemed highly amused by the whole business, and said:

'It seems such a waste of everyone's time, to send all these things from here to the Garden, and then have them brought all the way back, when it's all in the family anyway!'

This seemed to Lady Wang and Grandmother Jia sufficient proof that, whatever anyone might have said to the contrary, Bao-yu still had his wits about him, and they said as much to each other in tones of some satisfaction. Faithful and the other maids could not help but smile too. They brought the presents in and displayed them one by one, describing them as they went along:

'A gold necklace and other jewellery in gold and precious stones - altogether eighty pieces; forty bolts of dragon-brocade for formal wear and one hundred and twenty bolts of silks and satins in various colours; one hundred and twenty costumes for the four seasons of the year. They have not had time in the kitchen to prepare the sheep and wine, so this is money in lieu.'

Grandmother Jia expressed her approval, and said softly to Xi-feng:

'You must tell Mrs Xue not to think of this as an empty formality. In due course, when Pan is back and she has that weight off her mind, she can have these made up into dresses for Chai. In the meantime, we shall take care of all the bedcovers for the wedding-day.'

'Yes Grandmother,' replied Xi-feng, and returned to her apartment. She sent Jia Lian over first to Aunt Xue's, then summoned Zhou Rui and Brightie to receive their instructions.

'When delivering the presents,' she said, 'you are not to use the main gate. Use the little side-gate in the garden, that used to be kept open. I shall be going over myself shortly. The side-gate has the advantage of being a long way from the Naiad's House. If anyone from any other apartment notices you, you are to tell them on no account to mention it at the Naiad's House.'

'Yes ma'am.'

The two men departed for Aunt Xue's apartment at the head of a contingent of servants bearing the presents.

Bao-yu was quite taken in by all this. His new feeling of happy anticipation had caused a general improvement in his health, though his manner of speech remained rather eccentric at times. When the present-bearers returned, the whole thing was accomplished without a single name being mentioned. The family and all the staff knew, but were under orders from Xi-feng to maintain abs6lute secrecy, and no one dared disobey.

Dai-yu meanwhile, for all the medicine she took, continued to grow iller with every day that passed. Nightingale did her utmost to raise her spirits. Our story finds her standing once more by Dai-yu's bedside, earnestly beseeching her:

'Miss, now that things have come to this pass, I simply must speak my mind. We know what it is that's eating your heart out. But can't you see that your fears are groundless? Why, look at the state Bao-yu is in! How can he possibly get married, when he's so ill? You must ignore these silly rumours, stop fretting and let yourself get better.'

Dai-yu gave a wraithlike smile, but said nothing. She started coughing again and brought up a lot more blood. Nightingale and Snowgoose came closer and watched her feebly struggling for breath. They knew that any further attempt to rally her would be to no avail, and could do nothing but stand there watching and weeping. Each day Nightingale went over three or four times to tell Grandmother Jia, but Faithful, judging the old lady's attitude towards Dai-yu to have hardened of late, intercepted her reports and hardly mentioned Dai-yu to her mistress. Grandmother Jia was preoccupied with the wedding arrangements, and in the absence of any particular news of Dai-yu, did not show a great deal of interest in the girl's fate, considering it sufficient that she should be receiving medical attention.

Previously, when she had been ill, Dai-yu had always received frequent visits from everyone in the household, from Grandmother Jia down to the humblest maidservant. But now not a single person came to see her. The only face she saw looking down at her was that of Nightingale. She began to feel her end drawing near, and struggled to say a few words to her:

'Dear Nightingale! Dear sister! Closest friend! Though you were Grandmother's maid before you came to serve me, over the years you have become as a sister to me...

She had to stop for breath. Nightingale felt a pang of pity, was reduced to tears and could say nothing. After a long silence, Dai-yu began to speak again, searching for breath between words:

'Dear sister! I am so uncomfortable lying down like this. Please help me up and sit next to me.

'I don't think you should sit up, Miss, in your condition. You might get cold in the draught.'

Dai-yu closed her eyes in silence. A little later she asked to sit up again. Nightingale and Snowgoose felt they could no longer deny her request. They propped her up on both sides with soft pillows, while Nightingale sat by her on the bed to give further support. Dai-yu was not equal to the effort. The bed where she sat on it seemed to dig into her, and she struggled with all her remaining strength to lift herself up and ease the pain. She told Snowgoose to come closer.

'My poems...

Her voice failed, and she fought for breath again. Snow-goose guessed that she meant the manuscripts she had been revising a few days previously, went to fetch them and laid them on Dai-yu's lap. Dai-yu nodded, then raised her eyes and gazed in the direction of a chest that stood on a stand close by. Snowgoose did not know how to interpret this and stood there at a loss. Dai-yu stared at her now with feverish impatience. She began to cough again and brought up another mouthful of blood. Snowgoose went to fetch some water, and Dai-yu rinsed her mouth and spat into the spittoon. Nightingale wiped her lips with a handkerchief. Dai-yu took the handkerchief from her and pointed to the chest. She tried to speak, but was again seized with an attack of breathlessness and closed her eyes.

'Lie down, Miss,' said Nightingale. Dai-yu shook her head. Nightingale thought she must want one of her handkerchiefs, and told Snowgoose to open the chest and bring her a plain white silk one. Dai-yu looked at it, and dropped it on the bed. Making a supreme effort, she gasped out:

'The ones with the writing on...'

Nightingale finally realized that she meant the handkerchiefs Bao-yu had sent her, the ones she had inscribed with her own poems. She told Snowgoose to fetch them, and herself handed them to Dai-yu, with these words of ad vice:

'You must lie down and rest, Miss. Don't start wearing yourself out. You can look at these another time, when you are feeling better.'

Dai-yu took the handkerchiefs in one hand and without even looking at them, brought round her other hand (which cost her a great effort) and tried with all her might to tear them in two. But she was so weak that all she could achieve was a pathetic trembling motion. Nightingale knew that Bao-yu was the object of all-this bitterness but dared not mention his name, saying instead:

'Miss, there is no sense in working yourself up again.'

Dai-yu nodded faintly, and slipped the handkerchiefs into her sleeve.

'Light the lamp,' she ordered.

Snowgoose promptly obeyed. Dai-yu looked into the lamp, then closed her eyes and sat in silence. Another fit of breathlessness. Then:

'Make up the fire in the brazier.'

Thinking she wanted it for the extra warmth, Nightingale protested:

'You should lie down, Miss, and have another cover on. And the fumes from the brazier might be bad for you.'

Dai-yu shook her head, and Snowgoose reluctantly made up the brazier, placing it on its stand on the floor. Dai-yu made a motion with her hand, indicating that she wanted it moved up onto the kang. Snowgoose lifted it and placed it there, temporarily using the floor-stand, -while she went out to fetch the special stand they used on the kang. Dai-yu, far from resting back in the warmth, now inclined her body slightly forward - Nightingale had to support her with both hands as she did so. Dai-yu took the handkerchiefs in one hand. Staring into the flames and nodding thoughtfully to herself, she dropped them into the brazier. Nightingale was horrified, but much as she would have liked to snatch them from the flames, she did not dare move her hands and leave Dai-yu unsupported. Snowgoose was out of the room, fetching the brazier-stand, and by now the handkerchiefs were all ablaze.

'Miss!' cried Nightingale. 'What are you doing?'

As if she had not heard, Dai-yu reached over for her manuscripts, glanced at them and let them fall again onto the kang. Nightingale, anxious lest she burn these too, leaned up against Dai-yu and freeing one hand, reached out with it to take hold of them. But before she could do so, Dai-yu had picked them up again and dropped them in the flames. The brazier was out of Nightingale's reach, and there was nothing she could do but look on helplessly.

Just at that moment Snowgoose came in with the stand. She saw Dai-yu drop something into the fire, and without knowing what it was, rushed forward to try and save it. The manuscripts had caught at once and were already ablaze. Heedless of - the danger to her hands, Snowgoose reached into the flames and pulled out what she could, throwing the paper on the floor and stamping frantically on it. But the fire had done its work, and only a few charred fragments remained.

Dai-yu closed her eyes and slumped back, almost causing Nightingale to topple over with her.

Nightingale, her heart thumping in great agitation, called Snowgoose over to help her settle Dai-yu down again. It was too late now to send for anyone. And yet, what if Dai-yu should die during the night, and the only people there were Snowgoose, herself and the one or two other junior maids in the Naiad's House? They passed a restless night. Morning came at last, and Dai-yu seemed a little more comfortable. -But after breakfast she suddenly began coughing and vomiting, and became tense and feverish again. Nightingale could see that she had reached a crisis. She called Snowgoose and the other juniors in and told them to mount watch, while she went to report to Grandmother Jia. But when she reached Grandmother Jia's apartment, she found it almost deserted. Only a few old nannies and charladies were there, keeping an eye.

'Where is Her Old Ladyship?' asked Nightingale.

'We don't know,' came the reply in chorus.

That was very odd, thought Nightingale. She went into Bao-yu's room and found that too quite empty, save for a single maid who answered with the same 'Don't know. By now Nightingale had more or less guessed the truth. How could they be so heartless and so cruel? And to think that not a soul had come to visit Dai-yu during the past few days! As the bitterness of it struck her with full force, she felt a great wave of resentment break out within her, and turned abruptly to go.

'I shall go and find Bao-yu, and see how *he* is faring! I wonder how he will manage to brazen it out in front of me! I remember last year, when I made up that story about Miss Lin going back to the South, he fell sick with despair. To think that now he should be openly doing a thing like this! Men must have hearts as cold as ice or snow. What hateful creatures they are!'

She was already at **Green** Delights, and found the court-yard gate ajar. All was quiet within. Suddenly she realized:

'Of course! If he is getting married, he will have a new apartment. But where?'

She was looking around her in uncertainty, when she saw Bao-yu's page boy Inky rush past, and called to him to stop. He came over, and with a broad smile asked:

'What are you doing here, Miss Nightingale?'

'I heard that Master Bao was getting married,' replied Nightingale, 'and I wanted to watch some of the fun. But I can see I've come to the wrong place. And I don't know when the wedding is taking place, either.'

'If I tell you,' said Inky in a confidential tone, 'you must promise not to tell Snowgoose. We've been given orders not to let any of you know. The wedding's to be tonight. Of course it's not being held here. The Master told Mr Lian to set aside another apartment.'

'What's the matter?' continued Inky, after a pause.

'Nothing,' replied Nightingale. 'You can go now.'

Inky rushed off again. Nightingale stood there for a while, lost in thought. Suddenly she remembered Dai-yu. She might already be dead! Her eyes filled with tears, and clenching her teeth, she said fiercely:

'Bao-yu! If she dies, you may think you can wash your hands of her in this callous way: but when you are happily married, and have your heart's desire, you needn't think you can look *me* in the face again!'

As she walked, she began to weep. She made her way, sobbing pitifully, across the Garden. She was not far from the Naiad's House, when she saw two junior maids standing at the gate, peeping out nervously. They saw her coming, and one of them cried out:

'There's Miss Nightingale! At last!'

Nightingale could see that all was not well. Gesturing to them anxiously to be silent, she hurried in, to find Dai-yu **red** in the face, the fire from her liver having risen upwards and inflamed her cheeks. This was a dangerous sign, and Nightingale called Dai-yu's old wet-nurse, Nannie Wang, to come and take a look. One glance was enough to reduce this old woman ~ tears. Nightingale had turned to Nannie Wang as an older person, who could be expected to lend them some courage in this extremity. But she turned out to be quite helpless, and only made Nightingale more distraught than before. Suddenly she thought of someone else she could turn to, and sent one of the younger maids to fetch her with all speed. Her choice might seem a strange one; but Nightingale reasoned that as a widow, Li Wan would certainly be excluded from Bao-yu's wedding festivities. Besides she was in general charge of affairs in the Garden, and it would be in order to ask her to come.

Li Wan was at home correcting some of Jia Lan's poems, when the maid came rushing frantically in and cried:

'Mrs Zhu! Miss Lin's dying! Everyone over there is in tears!'

Li Wan rose startled to her feet and without a word set off at once for the Naiad's House, followed by her maids Candida and Casta. As she walked, she wept and lamented to herself:

'When I think of all the times we have spent together - oh my poor cousin! So lovely, so gifted! There is hardly another like her. Only Frost Maiden and the Goddess of the Moon could rival her. How can she be

leaving us at such a tender age, for that distant land from whence no travellers return… And to think that because of Xi-feng's deceitful scheme, I have not been able to show myself at the Naiad's House and have done nothing to show my sisterly affection! Oh the poor, dear girl!'

She was already at the gate of the Naiad's House. There was no sound from within. She began to fret.

'I must be too late! She must have died already and they are resting between their lamentations. I wonder if her grave-clothes and coverlet are ready?'

She quickened her step and hurried on into the room. A young maid standing at the inner doorway had already seen her, and called out:

'Mrs Zhu is here!'

Nightingale hurried out to meet her.

'How is she?' asked Li Wan.

Nightingale tried to answer but all she could muster was a choked sob. Tears poured down her cheeks like pearls from a broken, necklace, as she pointed silently to where Dai-yu lay. Realizing With a pang what Nightingale's pitiable condition must portend, Li Wan asked no more, but went over at once to see for herself. Dai-yu no longer had the strength to speak. When Li Wan said her name a few times, her eyes opened a slit as if in recognition of the voice. But her eyelids and lips could only make a trembling suggestion of a movement. Although she still breathed, it was now more than she could manage to utter a single word, or shed a single tear.

Li Wan turned around and saw that Nightingale was no longer in the room. She asked Snowgoose where she was, and Snowgoose replied:

'In the outer room.

Li Wan hurried out, to find Nightingale lying on the empty bed, her face a ghastly **green,** her eyes closed, tears streaming down her cheeks. Where her head lay on the embroidered pillow, with its border of fine brocade, was a patch the size of a small plate, wet with her tears and the copious effusions of her nose. When Li Wan called to her, she opened her eyes slowly, and raised herself slightly on the bed.

'Silly girl!' Li Wan upbraided her. 'Is this a time for tears? Fetch Miss Lin's grave-clothes and dress her in them. Are you going to leave it till it is too late? Would you have her go naked from the world? Would you ruin her honour?'

This released a fresh flood of tears on Nightingale's part. Li Wan wept herself, fretfully wiping her eyes and patting Nightingale on the shoulder.

'Dear girl! Look how you are upsetting me now, and making me cry. Hurry and get her things ready. If we delay much longer, it will all be over.'

They were in this state of trepidation, when they heard footsteps outside, and someone came running into the room in a great flurry, causing Li Wan to start back in alarm. It was Patience. When she saw their tear-stained faces, she stopped abruptly and stared at them aghast for a while.

'Why aren't you over there?' asked Li Wan. 'What do you want here?'

As she spoke, Steward Lin's wife also came into the room. Patience answered:

'Mrs Lian was worried, and sent me to see how things were. As you are here, Mrs Zhu, I can tell her to set her mind at rest.'

Li Wan nodded. Patience went on:

'I should like to see Miss Lin myself.' So saying, she walked into Dai-yu's bed-chamber, with tears on her cheeks. Li Wan turned to Steward Lin's wife and said:

'You have come just in time. Go and find your husband, and tell him to prepare Miss Lin's coffin and whatever else is necessary. When everything has been satisfactorily arranged, he is to let me know. There is no need to go over to the house.'

'Yes, ma'am,' replied Lin's wife, but made no move to go.

'Well? Is there something else?' asked Li Wan.

'Mrs Lian and Her Old Ladyship,' replied the steward's wife, 'have decided that they 'need Miss Nightingale in attendance over there.'

Before Li Wan could say anything, Nightingale spoke up for herself:

'Mrs Lin, will you be so kind as to leave now? Can't you even wait until she is dead? We will leave her then, you need not fear. How can you be so...

She stopped short, thinking it inadvisable to be so rude, and changing her tone somewhat, said:

'Besides, after waiting on a sick person, I fear we would not be fit for such an occasion. And while Miss Lin is still alive, she may ask for me at any time.

Li Wan tried to make the peace between them.

'The truth is,' she said, 'that this maid and Miss Lin have an affinity from a past life. Snowgoose, I know,

was Miss Lin's original maid from home, but even she is not so indispensable as Nightingale. We really cannot separate them just now.

Lin's wife, who had been considerably put out by Nightingale's outspoken response, was obliged to contain herself when Li Wan came to the maid's defence. Seeing Nightingale reduced to floods of tears, she eyed her with a hostile smile and said:

'I shall ignore Miss Nightingale's rudeness. But am I to report what you have just said to Her Old Ladyship? And am I to tell Mrs Lian?'

As she was speaking, Patience came out of Dai-yu's bedchamber, wiping her eyes

'Tell Mrs Lian what.?' she asked.

Lin's wife told her the substance of their conversation. Patience lowered her head in thought. After a moment, she said:

'Why can't you take Snowgoose?'

'Would she do?' asked Li Wan. Patience went up to her and whispered a few words in her ear. Li Wan nodded, and said:

'Well in that case, it will be just as good if we send Snowgoose.'

'Will Miss Snowgoose do?' Lin's wife asked Patience. 'Yes,' replied Patience. 'She will do just as well.'

'Then will you please tell her to come with me straight away,' said Lin's wife. 'I shall report to Her Old Ladyship and Mrs Lian. I shall say that you are both responsible for the arrangement, mind. And later you can tell Mrs Lian yourself, Miss Patience.'

'Of course,' replied Li Wan curtly. 'Do you mean to say that someone as old and experienced as you cannot even take the responsibility for a small thing like this?'

Lin's wife smiled.

'It is not that I can't take the responsibility. It is just that Her Old Ladyship and Mrs Lian have arranged everything and the likes of us don't really know what's going on. In the circumstances, it seems only right to mention you and Miss Patience.'

Patience had already told Snowgoose to come out. Over the past few days Snowgoose had fallen rather into disfavour with Dai-yu, who had called her a 'silly, ignorant child', and her feelings of loyalty towards her mistress had as a consequence been rather blunted. Besides there was no question of her disobeying an order from Her Old Ladyship and Mrs Lian. She therefore tidied her hair quickly and made ready to go. Patience told her to change into her smartest clothes and to go with Mrs Lin. Patience herself stayed on and spoke for a short while with Li Wan. Before she left, Li Wan instructed her to call in on Lin's wife on her way and tell her that her husband should make the necessary preparations for Dai-yu with all possible speed. This Patience agreed to do and went on her way. As she turned a corner in the Garden, she caught sight of Lin's wife walking ahead of her with Snowgoose and called to her to wait.

'I will take Snowgoose with me. You go and tell your husband to prepare Miss Lin's things. I will report to Mrs Lian for you.'

'Yes, Miss Patience,' said Lin's wife, and went on her errand.

Patience then took Snowgoose to the bridal apartment, and reported there herself before going to see to her own affairs.

When Snowgoose saw the wedding preparations in full swing and thought of Dai-yu lying at death's door, she felt a pang of grief. But she dared not show her feelings in the presence of Grandmother Jia and Xi-feng. 'What can they want me for?' she wondered. 'I must see what is going on. I know Bao-yu used to be head over heels in love with Miss Lin. And yet now he seems to have deserted her. I begin to wonder if this illness of his is genuine or just a pretence. He may have made the whole thing up so as to avoid upsetting Miss Lin. By pretending to lose his jade and acting like an idiot, perhaps he thinks he can put her off, and marry Miss Chai with a clear conscience? I must watch him closely, and see if he acts the fool when he sees me. Surely he won't keep up the pretence on his wedding-day?' She slipped in and stood spying at the inner doorway.

Now, though Bao-yu's mind was still clouded from the loss of his jade, his sense of joy at the prospect of marrying Dai-yu - in his eyes the most blessed, the most wonderful thing that had happened in heaven or earth since time began - had caused a temporary resurgence of physical well-being, if not a full restoration of his mental faculties. Xi-feng's ingenious plan had had exactly the intended effect, and he was now counting the minutes till he should see Dai-yu. Today was the day when all his dreams were to come true, and he was filled with a feeling of ecstasy. He still occasionally let slip some tell-tale imbecile remark, but in other respects gave the appearance of having completely recovered. All this Snowgoose observed, and was

filled with hatred for him and grief for her mistress. She knew nothing of the true cause of his joy:

While Snowgoose slipped away unobserved, Bao-yu told Aroma to hurry and dress him in his bridegroom's finery. He sat in Lady Wang's chamber, watching Xi-feng and You-shi bustling about their preparations, himself bursting with impatience for the great moment.

'If Cousin Lin is coming from the Garden,' he asked Aroma, 'why all this fuss? Why isn't she here yet?'

Suppressing a smile, Aroma replied;

'She has to wait for the propitious moment.' Xi-feng turned to Lady Wang and said:

'Because we are in mourning, we cannot have music in the street. But the traditional ceremony would seem so drab without any music at all, so I have told some of the women-servants with a bit of musical knowledge, the ones who used to look after the actresses, to come and play a little, to add a bit of a festive touch.'

Lady Wang nodded, and said she thought this a good idea. Presently the great bridal palanquin was born in through the main gate. The little ensemble of women-servants played, as it entered down an avenue of twelve pairs of palace-lanterns, creating a passably stylish impression. The Master of Ceremonies requested the bride to step out of her palanquin, and Bao-yu saw the Matron of Honour, all in **red,** lead out his bride, her face concealed by the bridal veil. There was a maid in attendance, and Bao-yu saw to his surprise that it was Snowgoose. This puzzled him for a moment.

'Why Snowgoose, and not Nightingale?' he asked himself. Then: 'Of course. Snowgoose is Dai-yu's original maid from the South, whereas Nightingale was one of our maids, which would never do.'

And so, when he saw Snowgoose, it was as if he had seen the face of Dai-yu herself beneath the veil.

The Master of Ceremonies chanted the liturgy, and the bride and groom knelt before Heaven and Earth. Grandmother Jia was called forth to receive their obeisances, as were Sir Zheng, Lady Wang and other elders of the family, after which they escorted the' couple into the hall and thence to the bridal chamber. Here they were made to sit on the bridal bed, were showered with dried fruit and subjected to the various other practices customary in old Nanking families such as the Jias, which we need not describe in detail here.

Jia Zheng, it will be remembered, had gone along with the plan grudgingly, in deference to Grandmother' Jia's wishes, retaining grave though unspoken doubts himself as to her theory of Bao-yu's luck'. But today, seeing Bao-yu bear himself with a semblance of dignity, he could not help but be pleased.

The bride was now sitting alone on the bridal bed, and the moment had come for the groom to remove her veil. Xi-feng had made her preparations for this event, and now asked Grandmother Jia, Lady Wang and others of the ladies present to step forward into the bridal chamber to

assist her. The sense of climax seemed to cause Bao-yu to revert somewhat to his imbecile ways, for as he approached his bride he said:

'Are you better now, coz? It's such a long time since we last saw each other. What do you want to go wrapping yourself up in that silly thing for?'

He was about to raise the veil. Grandmother Jia broke into a cold sweat. But he hesitated, thinking to himself:

'I know how sensitive Cousin Lin is. I must be very careful not to offend her.'

He waited a little longer. But soon the suspense became unbearable, and he walked up to her and lifted the veil. The Matron of Honour took it from him, while Snow-goose melted into the background and Oriole came forward to take her place. Bao-yu stared at his bride. Surely this was Bao-chai? Incredulous, with one hand holding the lantern, he rubbed his eyes with the other and looked again. It *was* Bao-chai. How pretty she looked, in her wedding-gown! He gazed at her soft skin, the full curve of her shoulders, and her hair done up in tresses that hung from her temples! Her eyes were moist, her lips quivered slightly. Her whole appearance had the simple elegance of a white lily, wet with pendant dew; the maidenly blush on her cheeks resembled apricot-blossom wreathed in mist. For a moment he stared at her in utter astonishment. Then he noticed that Oriole was standing at her side, while Snowgoose had quite vanished. A feeling of helpless bewilderment seized him, and thinking he must be dreaming, he stood there in a motionless daze. The maids took the lamp from him and helped him to a chair, where he sat with his eyes fixed in front of him, still without uttering a single word. Grandmother Jia was anxious lest this might signal the approach of another of his fits, and herself came over to rally him, while Xi-feng and You-shi escorted Bao-chai to a chair in the inner part of the room. Bao-chai held her head bowed and said nothing.

After a while, Bao-yu had composed himself sufficiently to think. He saw Grandmother Jia and Lady Wang sitting opposite him, and asked Aroma in a whisper:

'Where am I? This must all be a dream.'

‘A dream? Why, it’s the happiest day of your life!’ said Aroma. ‘How can you be so silly? Take care: Sir Zeng is outside.’

Pointing now to where Bao-chai sat, and still whispering, Bao-yu asked again:

‘Who is that beautiful lady sitting over there?’

Aroma found this so comical that for a while she could say nothing, but held her hand to her face to conceal her mirth. Finally she replied:

‘That is your bride, the new Mrs Bao-yu.’

The other maids also turned away, unable to contain their laughter.

Bao-yu: ‘Don’t be so silly! What do you mean, "Mrs Bao-yu"? Who *is* Mrs Bao-yu?’

Aroma: ‘Miss Chai.’

Bao-yu: ‘But what about Miss Lin?’

Aroma: ‘The Master decided you should marry Miss Chai. What’s Miss Lin got td do with it?’

Bao-yu: ‘But I saw her just a moment ago, and Snow-goose. too. They couldn’t have just vanished! What sort of trick is this that you’re all playing on me?’

Xi-feng came up and whispered in his ear:

‘Miss Chai is sitting over there, so please stop talking like this. If you offend her,. Grannie will be very cross with you.’

Bao-yu was now more hopelessly confused than ever.

The mysterious goings-on of that night, c6ming on top of his already precarious mental state, had wrought him up to such a pitch of despair that all he could do was cry - ‘I must find Cousin Lin!’ - again and again. Grandmother Jia and the other ladies tried to comfort him but he was impervious to their efforts. Furthermore, with Bao-chai in the room, they had to be careful what they said. Baoyu was clearly suffering from a severe relapse, and they now abandoned their attempts to rally him and instead helped him to bed, while ordering several sticks of gum benzoin incense to be lit, the heavy, sedative fumes of which soon filled the room. They all stood in awesome hush. After a short while, the incense began to take effect and Bao-yu sank into a heavy slumber, much to the relief of the ladies, who sat down again to await the dawn. Grandmother Jia told Xi-feng to ask Bao-chai to lie down and rest, which she did, fully dressed as she was, behaving as though she had heard nothing.

Jia Zheng had remained in an outer room during all of this, and so had seen nothing to disillusion him of the reassuring impression he had received earlier on. The following day, as it happened, was the day selected according to the almanac for his departure to his new post. After a short rest, he took formal leave of the festivities and returned to his apartment. Grandmother Jia, too, left Baoyu sound asleep and returned to her apartment for a brief rest.

The next morning, Jia Zheng took leave of the ancestors in the family shrine and came to bid his mother farewell. He bowed before her and said:

‘I, your unworthy son, am about to depart for afar. My only wish is that you should keep warm in the cold weather and take good care of yourself. As soon as I arrive at my post, I shall write to ask how you are. You are not to worry on my account. Bao-yu’s marriage has now been celebrated in accordance with your wishes, and it only remains for me to beg you to instruct him, and impart to him the wisdom of your years.’

Grandmother Jia, for fear that Jia Zheng would worry on his journey, made no mention of Bao-yu’s relapse but merely said:

‘There is one thing I should tell you. Although the rites were performed last night, Bao-yu’s marriage was not properly consummated. His health would not allow it. Custom, I know, decrees that he should see you off today. But in view of all the circumstances, his earlier illness, the luck turning, his still fragile state of convalescence and yesterday’s exertions, I am worried that by going out he might catch a chill. So I put it to you: if you wish him to fulfil his filial obligations by seeing you off, then send for him at once and instruct him accordingly; but if you love him, then spare him and let him say goodbye and make his kotow to you here.’

‘Why should I want him to see me off?’ returned Jia Zheng. ‘All I want is that from now on he should study in earnest. That would bring me greater pleasure by far.’

Grandmother Jia was most relieved to hear this. She told Jia Zheng to be seated and sent Faithful, after imparting to her various secret instructions, to fetch Bao-yu and to bring Aroma with him. Faithful had not been away many minutes, when Bao-yu came in and with the usual promptings, performed his duty to his father. Luckily the sight of his father brought him, for a few moments, sufficient clarity to get through the formalities without any gross lapses. Jia Zheng delivered himself of a few exhortatory words, to all of which his son gave the correct replies. Then Jia Zheng told Aroma to escort him back to his room, while he

himself went to Lady Wang's apartment. There he earnestly enjoined Lady Wang to take charge of Bao-yu's moral welfare during his absence.

'There must be none of his previous unruliness,' he added. 'He must now prepare himself to enter for next year's provincial examination.

Lady Wang assured him that she would do her utmost, and without mentioning anything else, at once sent a maid to escort Bao-chai into the room. Bao-chai performed the rite proper to a newly-married bride seeing off her father-in-law, and then remained in the room when Jia Zheng left. The other women-folk accompanied him as far as the inner gate before turning back. Cousin Zhen and the other young male Jias received a few words of exhortation, drank a farewell toast, and, together with a crowd of other friends and relatives, accompanied him as far as the Hostelry of the Tearful Parting, some three or four miles beyond the city walls, where they bid their final farewell.

But of Jia Zheng's departure no more. Let us return to Bao-yu, who on leaving his father, had suffered an immediate relapse. His mind became more and more clouded, and he could swallow neither food nor drink. Whether or not he was to emerge from this crisis alive will be revealed in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 98

***Crimson** Pearl's suffering spirit returns*
to the Realm of Separation
And the convalescent Stone-in-waiting weeps
at the scene of past affection

On his return from seeing his father, Bao-yu, as we have seen, regressed into a worse state of stupor and depression than ever. He was too lacking in energy to move, and could eat nothing, but fell straight into a heavy slumber. Once more the doctor was called, once more he took Baoyu's pulses and made out a prescription, which was administered to no effect. He could not even recognize the people around him. And yet, if helped into a sitting position, he could still pass for someone in normal health. Provided he was not called upon to do anything, there were no external symptoms to indicate how seriously ill he was. He continued like this for several days, to the increasing anxiety of the family, until the Ninth Day after the wedding, when according to tradition the newly-married couple should visit the bride's family. If they did not go, Aunt Xue would be most offended. But if they went with Bao-yu in his present state, whatever were they to say? Knowing that his illness was caused by his attachment to Dai-yu, Grandmother Jia would have liked to make a clean breast of it and tell Aunt Xue. But she feared that this too might cause offence and ill-feeling. It was also difficult for her to be of any comfort to Bao-chai, who was in a delicate position as a new member of the Jia family. Such comfort could only be rendered by a visit from the girl's mother, which would be difficult if they had already offended her by not celebrating the Ninth Day. It must be gone through with. Grandmother Jia imparted her views on the matter to Lady Wang and Xi-feng:

'It is only Bao-yu's mind that has been temporarily affected. I don't think a little excursion would do him any harm. We must prepare two small sedan-chairs, and send a maid to support him. They can go through the Garden. Once the Ninth Day has been properly celebrated, ~e can ask Mrs Xue to come over and comfort Bao-chai, while we do our utmost to restore Bao-yu to health. They will both benefit.'

Lady Wang agreed and immediately began making the necessary preparations. Bao-chai acquiesced in the charade out of a sense of conjugal duty, while Bao-yu in his moronic state was easily manipulated. Bao-chai now knew the full truth, and in her own mind blamed her mother for making a foolish decision. But now that things had gone this far she said nothing. Aunt Xue herself, when she witnessed Bao-yu's pitiful condition, began to regret having ever given her consent, and could only bring herself to play a perfunctory part in the proceedings.

When they returned home, Bao-yu's condition seemed to grow worse. By the next day he could not even sit up in bed. This deterioration continued daily, until he could no longer swallow medicine or water. Aunt Xue was there, and she and the other ladies in their frantic despair scoured the city for eminent physicians, without finding one that could diagnose the illness. Finally they discovered, lodging in a broken-down temple outside the city, a down-and-out practitioner by the name of Bi Zhi-an, who diagnosed it as a case of severe emotional shock, aggravated by a failure to dress in accordance with the seasons and by irregular

eating habits, with consequent accumulation of choler and obstruction of the humours. In short, an internal disorder made worse by external factors. He made out a prescription in accordance with this diagnosis, which was administered that evening. At about ten o'clock it began to take effect. Bao-yu began to show signs of consciousness and asked for water to drink. Grandmother Jia, Lady Wang and all the other ladies congregated round the sick-bed felt that they could at last have a brief respite from their vigil, and Aunt Xue was invited to bring Bao-chai with her to Grandmother Jia's apartment to rest for a while.

His brief access of clarity enabled Bao-yu to understand the gravity of his illness. When the others had gone and he was left alone with Aroma, he called her over to his side and taking her by the hand said tearfully:

'Please tell me how Cousin Chai came to be here? I remember Father marrying me to Cousin. Lin. Why has *she* been made to go? Why has Cousin Chai taken her place? She has no right to be here! I'd like to tell her so, but I don't want to offend her. How has Cousin Lin taken it? Is she very upset?'

Aroma did not dare tell him the truth, but merely said:

'Miss Lin is ill.'

'I must go and see her,' insisted Bao-yu. He wanted to get up, but days of going without food and drink had so sapped his strength- that he could no longer move, but could only weep bitterly and say:

'I know I am going to die! There's something on my mind, something very important, that I want. you to tell Grannie for me. Cousin Lin and I are both ill. We are both dying. It will be too late to help us when we are dead; but if they prepare a room for us now and if we are taken there before it is too late, we can at least be cared for together while we are still alive, and be laid out together when we die. Do this for me, for friendship's sake!'

Aroma found this plea at once disturbing, comical and moving. Bao-chai, who happened to be passing with Oriole, heard every word and took him to task straight away.

'Instead of resting and trying to get well, you make yourself iller with all this gloomy talk! Grandmother has scarcely stopped worrying about you for a moment, and here you are causing more trouble for her. She is over eighty now and may not live to acquire a title because of your achievements; but at least, by leading a good life, you can repay her a little for all that she has suffered for your sake. And I hardly need mention the agonies Mother has endured in bringing you up. You are the only son she has left. If you were to die, think how she would suffer! As for me, I am wretched enough as it is; you don't need to make a widow of me. Three good reasons why even if you want to die, the powers above will not let you and you will not be able to. After four or five days of proper rest and care, your illness will pass, your strength will be restored and you will be yourself again.'

For a while Bao-yu could think of no reply to this homily. Finally he gave a silly laugh and said:

'After not speaking to me for so long, here you are lecturing me. You are wasting your breath.'

Encouraged by this response to go a step further, Bao-chai said:

'Let me tell you the plain truth, then. Some days ago, while you were unconscious, Cousin Lin passed away.'

With a sudden movement, Bao-yu sat up and cried out in horror:

'It can't be true!'

'It is. Would I lie about such a thing? Grandmother and Mother knew how fond you were of each other, and wouldn't tell you because they were afraid that if they did, you would die too.'

Bao-yu began howling unrestrainedly and slumped back in his bed. Suddenly all was pitch black before his eyes. He could not tell where he was and was beginning to feel very lost, when he thought he saw a man walking towards him and asked in a bewildered tone of voice:

'Would you be so kind as to tell me where I am?'

'This,' replied the stranger, 'is the road to the Springs of the Nether World. Your time is not yet come. What brings you here?'

'I have just learned of the death of a friend and have come to find her. But I seem to have lost my way.'

'Who is this friend of yours?'

'Lin Dai-yu of Soochow.'

The man gave a chilling smile:

'In life Lin Dai-yu was no ordinary mortal, and in death she has become no ordinary shade. An ordinary mortal has two souls which coalesce at birth to vitalize the physical frame, and disperse at death to rejoin the cosmic flux. If you consider the impossibility of

tracing even such ordinary human entities in the Nether World, you will realize what a futile task it is to look for Lin Dai-yu. You had better return at once.

After standing for a moment lost in thought, Bao-yu asked again:

'But if as you say, death is a dispersion, how can there be such a place as the Nether World?'

'There is,' replied the man with a superior smile, 'and yet there is not, such a place. It is a teaching, devised to warn mankind in its blind attachment to the idea of life and death. The Supreme Wrath is aroused by human folly in all forms - whether it be excessive ambition, premature death self-sought, or futile self-destruction through debauchery and a life of overweening violence. Hell is the place where souls such as these are imprisoned and made to suffer countless torments in expiation of their- sins. This search of yours for Lin Dai-yu is a case of futile self-delusion. Dai-yu has already returned to the Land of Illusion and if you really want to find her you must cultivate your mind and strengthen your spiritual nature. Then one day you will see her again. But if you throw your life away, you will be guilty of premature death self-sought and will be confined to Hell. And then, although you may be allowed to see your parents, you will certainly never see Dai-yu again.'

When he had finished speaking, the man took a stone from within his sleeve and threw it at Bao-yu's chest. The words he had~ spoken and the impact of the stone as it-landed on his chest combined to give Bao-yu such a fright that he would have returned home at once, if he had only know which way to turn. In his confusion he suddenly heard a voice, and turning, saw the figures of Grandmother Jia, Lady Wang, Bao-chai, Aroma and his other maids standing in a circle around him, weeping and calling his name. He was lying on his own bed. The **red** lamp was on the table. The moon was shining brilliantly through the window. He was back among the elegant comforts of his own home. A moment's reflection told him that what he had just experienced had been a dream. He was in a cold sweat. Though his mind felt strangely lucid, thinking only intensified his feeling of helpless desolation, and he uttered several profound sighs.

Bao-chai had known of Dai-yu's death for several days. While Grandmother Jia had forbidden the maids to tell him for fear of further complicating his illness, she felt she knew better. Aware that it was Dai-yu who lay at the root of his illness and that the loss of his jade was only a secondary factor, she took the opportunity of breaking the news of her death to him in this abrupt manner, hoping that by severing his attachment once and for all she would enable- his sanity and health to be restored. Grandmother Jia, Lady Wang and company were not aware of her intentions and at first reproached her for her lack of caution. But when they saw Bao-yu regain consciousness; they were all greatly relieved and went at once to the library to ask doctor Bi to come in and examine his patient again. The doctor carefully took his pulses.

'How odd!' he exclaimed. 'His pulses are deep and still, his spirit calm, the oppression quite dispersed. Tomorrow he must take a regulative draught, which I shall prescribe, and he should make a prompt and complete recovery.'

The doctor left and the ladies all returned to their apartments in much improved spirits.

Although at first Aroma greatly resented the way in which Bao-chai had broken the news, she did not dare say so. Oriole, on the other hand, reproved her mistress in private for having been, as she put it, too hasty.

'What do you know about such things?' retorted Bao-chai. 'Leave this to me. I take full responsibility.'

Bao-chai ignored the opinions and criticisms of those around her and continued to keep a close watch on Baoyu's progress, probing him judiciously, like an acupunturist with a needle.

A day or two later, he began to feel a slight improvement in himself, though his mental equilibrium was still easily disturbed by the least thought of Dai-yu. Aroma was constantly at his side, with such words of consolation as:

'The Master chose Miss Chai as your bride for her more dependable nature. He thought Miss Lin too difficult and temperamental for you, and besides there was always the fear that she would not live long. Then later Her Old Ladyship thought you were not in a fit state to know what was best for you and would only be upset and make yourself iller if you knew the truth, so she made Snowgoose come over, to try and make things easier for you.

This did nothing to lessen his grief, and he often wept inconsolably. But each time he thought of putting an end to his life, he remembered the words of the stranger in his dream; and then he thought of the distress his death would cause his mother and

grandmother and knew that he could not tear himself away from them. He also reflected that Dai-yu was dead, and that Bao-chai was a fine lady in her-- own right; there must after all have been some truth in the bond of gold and jade. This thought eased his mind a little. Bao-chai could see that things were improving, and herself felt calnaer as a result. Every day she scrupulously performed her duties towards Gran4mother Jia and Lady Wang, and when these were completed, did all she could to cure Bao-yu of his grief. He was still not able to sit up for long periods, but often when he saw her sitting by his bedside he would succumb to his old weakness for the fairer sex. She tried to rally him in an earnest manner, saying:

'The important thing is to take care of your health. Now that we are married, we have a whole lifetime ahead of us.

He was reluctant to listen to her advice. But since his grandmother, his mother, Aunt Xue and all the others took it in turns to watch over him during the day, and since Bao-chai slept on her own in an adjoining room, and he was waited on at night by one or two maids of Grandmother Jia's, he found himself left with little choice but to rest and get well again. And as time went by and Bao-chai proved herself a gentle and devoted companion, he found that a small part of his love for Dai-yu began to transfer itself to her. But this belongs to a later part of our story.

Let us return to the wedding-day. Dai-yu, it will be remembered, had lost consciousness while it was still light, and was holding onto life by the slenderest thread. Her weak breathing and precarious heart-beat caused Li Wan and Nightingale to weep in despair. By evening however, she seemed easier again. She feebly opened her~ eyes, and seemed to be asking for water or -medicine.' Snowgoose had already left,- and only Li Wan and Nightingale were at her bedside. Nightingale brought her a little cup of pear-juice blended with a decoction of longans, and with a small silver spoon fed her two or three spoonfuls of it. Dai-yu closed her eyes and rested for a while. Consciousness would flicker momentarily within her, then fade away again. Li Wan recognized this peaceful state as the last transient revival of the dying, but thinking that the end would not come for a few hours, she returned briefly to Sweet-rice Village to see to her own affairs.

Dai-yu opened her eyes again. Seeing no one in the room but Nightingale and her old wet-nurse and a few other junior maids, she clutched Nightingale's hand and said with a great effort:

'I am finished! After the years you have spent seeing to my every need, I had hoped the two of us could always be together. But now...'

She broke off, panting for breath, closed her eyes and lay still, gripping Nightingale's hand tightly. Nightingale did not dare to move. She had thought that Dai-yu seemed so much better, had even hoped she might pull through after all; but these words sent a chill down her spine. After a long pause, Dai-yu spoke again:

'Sister Nightingale! I have no family of my own here. My body is pure: promise me you'll ask them to bury me at home!'

She closed her eyes again and was silent. Her grip tightened still further around Nightingale's hand, and she was seized with another paroxysm of breathlessness. When she could breathe again, her outward breaths became longer, her inward breaths shorter and more feeble. They quickened at a rate that caused Nightingale great alarm, and she sent at once for Li Wan. Tan-chun happened to arrive at that very moment. Nightingale said to her in an urgent whisper:

'Miss! Come and look at Miss Lin!' As she spoke, her tears fell like drops of rain. Tan-chun came over and felt Dai-yu's hand. It was already cold, and her eyes were glazed and lifeless. Tan-chun and Nightingale wept as they - gave orders for water to be brought and for Dai-yu to be washed. Now Li Wan came hurrying in. She, Tanchun and Nightingale looked at each other, but were too shocked to say a word. They began wiping Dai-yu's face with a flannel, when suddenly she cried out in a loud voice:

'Bao-yu! Bao-yu! How could you...

Her whole body broke into a cold sweat and she could say no more. They tried to calm her down and support her. She sweated more and more profusely and became colder by degrees. Tan-chun and Li Wan told the maids to put up her hair and dress her in her ~ and to be quick about it. Her eyes rolled upwards. Alas!

Her fragrant soul disperses, wafted on the breeze;
Her sorrows now a dream, drifting into the night.

The moment Dai-yu breathed her last was the moment that Bao-yu took Bao-chai to be his wife. Nightingale and Dai-yu's other maids began to wail and lament Li Wan and Tan-chun recalled all their past affection for her, a memory made the more poignant by the lonely circumstances of her death, and they too shed many bitter and heartfelt tears. The wedding chamber was a off, and the guests heard nothing of the weeping, but from the Naiad's House, in a brief interval of silence between their lamentations, they heard a faint snatch of music in the distance. They strained their ears to catch it, but it was gone. Tan-chun and Li Wan went out into the garden to listen again, but all they could hear was the rustling of the bamboos in the wind. The moonlight cast a wavering shadow on the wall. It was an eerie, desolate night.

Presently they sent for Steward Lin's wife and had Dai-yu properly laid out. Maids were set to watch the body. Early next morning they reported her death to who was now placed in an acute dilemma: Grannie Jia and Lady Wang were both extremely busy and distraught, Jia Zheng was about to leave, Bao-yu in a worse stupor than ever; if she broke the bad news to them now, she was afraid for Grandmother Jia's and Lady Wang's health. They were already burdened with so many worries, and might not be equal to the shock. She decided to go to the Garden herself. When she arrived at the Naiad's House and went inside, she could not help but weep. She spoke to Li Wan and Tan-chun, and learned that all the correct preparations had been made for the laying out.

'Good,' she said, resuming her brisk tone of voice. 'But I wish you had told me earlier. I have been so worried.'

'How could we?' they replied. 'Sir Zheng was just leaving.'

'Perhaps it was considerate of you,' said Xi-feng, on reflection. 'Well, I must go back and see to the other half of this lovesick pair. I really do not know what to do for the best. I ought to tell them today. But if I do, I am afraid it may be too much for Grandmother.'

'You do what you think best,' said Li Wan.

Xi-feng nodded and hurried back. She arrived to find the doctor with Bao-yu. Hearing him say that Bao-yu's condition was nothing to worry about, and seeing that Grandmothe'r Jia and Lady Wang were calmer as a consequence, she decided to tell them without further delay. She broke it to them as gently as possible, in a place where there was no chance of Bao-yu overhearing. The news had a shattering effect, and Grandmother Jia broke down in tears.

'I am to blame! I have brought this on her! But why did she have to be so obstinate and foolish?'

She wanted to go to the Garden to mourn, but was torn between that and her concern for Bao-yu. Lady Wang and the others all tried to dissuade her, containing their own grief as best they could, and saying:

'You shouldn't go, Mother. You must take care of yourself.'

Grandmother Jia submitted to their counsel, and had to content herself with sending Lady Wang in her place.

'Give her spirit this message from me. Tell her: "It is not because I am hard-hearted that I have not come to bid you farewell, but because my grandson needs me. here. You are my daughter's child, I know. But Bao-yu is a Jia, and I cannot leave him now. If I did and he were to die, how would I ever be able to look his father in the face again?"'

The old lady broke down again. Lady Wang tried to console her

'We all know how much you loved Miss Lin, Mother. But the fates have decreed her an early death. She is dead now and there is nothing more we can do for her, except give her the best possible funeral. That at least will be some expression of our love for her, and will bring some peace to her departed spirit, and that of her dear mother.'

These words brought a fresh and still more heartbroken outburst of tears from Grandmother Jia. Xi-feng was worried that she might damage her health through excess of grief and decided to take advantage of Bao-yu's clouded state of mind to create a distraction. She gave secret instructions to one of the maids, who left the room. Shortly afterwards another maid came in with the timely news that Bao-yu was demanding to see his grandmother. Grand-mother Jia stopped crying at once, and asked.

'Gracious! Is anything the matter?'

Xi-feng smiled coaxingly.

'Of course not, Grannie. He is probably just missing you.

Grandmother Jia immediately put a hand on Pearl's shoulder and set off, accompanied by Xi-feng. They were half-way to Bao-yu's apartment, when they met Lady Wang

returning from the Naiad's House. She gave a mmute account of her mission, which Grandmother Jia found most moving. But she was intent upon visiting Baoyu, and had to check her tears and contain her grief.

'Since you have been there and all is in order, I shall not go myself but leave it all to you. It would grieve me too much to see her. I shall rely on you to do things properly.'

Lady Wang and Xi-feng replied that she was quite right to do so, and left her to continue on her way to Bao-yu. When she saw him, she asked:

'What. did you want me for?'

He smiled wanly, and said:

'Yesterday evening I saw Cousin Lin, and she told me she was going back to the South. I have been thinking that there is no one here to persuade her to stay, except you, Grannie. Will you, for my sake?'

'Of course I will,' replied Grandmother Jia; 'Don't worry.

Aroma helped Bao-yu to lie down again, and Grandmother Jia went into Bao-chai's room. This was before Bao-chai had celebrated her Ninth Day, and she still felt rather shy in her new surroundings. When Grandmother Jia came in, she saw that the old lady's face was wet with tears. She served her with a cup of tea, after which Grandmother Jia asked her to be seated, which she did with great diffidence, sitting by her side on the edge of the couch and saying:

'I hear that Cousin Lin has been ill. I hope she is getting better now.'

Tears began to stream from Grandmother Jia's eyes.

'My child! If I tell you, you must promise not to tell Bao-yu. It is all because of your Cousin Lin that you have been made to suffer so. But now that you are Bao-yu's wife, I must tell you the truth. Your Cousin Lin has been dead now for some time. She died just at the time you were married. This present illness of Bao-yu's is all because of her. The three of you were neighbours at one time in the Garden, so I am sure you know what I mean.'

The colour rose in Bao-chai's cheeks. She began to weep too, as she thought of her departed friend. Grandmother Jia talked with her a little longer, and then left.

It was from this moment that Bao-chai began to rack her brains for a cure for Bao-yu. She still felt the need to be cautious, and it was only after the Ninth Day that she acquired the confidence to begin the course of treatment which was to prove so efficacious. With Bao-yu's recovery, it became possible for everyone to talk to him more openly again. But although his health showed a marked daily improvement, nothing could abate his obsessive love for Dai-yu, and he began to insist on going over himself to weep by her corpse. Grandmother Jia forbade it, on the grounds that he was not yet fully cured and any such excursion might upset him. But cooped up as he was in his room, his depression grew almost intolerable and he began to suffer from his old fits again. It was finally the doctor who, in view of the psychological nature of the illness, positively recommended the excursion, to enhance the efficacy of his medicines and speed up the cure. Bao-yu, when he heard this, wanted to go to the Naiad's House at once. This time Grandmother Jia reluctantly gave her permission, and told them to bring a bamboo carrying-chair and help him into it. She and Lady Wang led the way. When they arrived and saw Dai-yu's coffin, Grandmother Jia nearly wept herself into a fit, and was only kept from doing so by the repeated intervention of Xi-feng and the others present. Lady Wang wept too. Li Wan then asked Grandmother Jia and Lady Wang to retire to the inner room, which they did, still weeping. As Bao-yu arrived, his thoughts went back to the days before Dai-yu had fallen ill, before things had taken this turn. The sight of the familiar room was too much for him, and he started howling wildly. How close they had once been! What a gulf death had put between them! His passionate display of grief began to concern them all. They were afraid it might be dangerous, coming so soon after his illness, and all tried to console him. He was already beside himself with weeping, however, and the most they could do was: help him to lie down and rest. The others who had accompanied him, including Bao-chai, all wept most bitterly.

Bao-yu, once he had sufficiently recovered mststed on seeing Nightingale and asking her what Dai-yu's last words had been. Nightingale had formed a most damning opinion of him; but seeing him now so overwhelmed with grief, she softened a little towards him. Besides Grand mother Jia and Lady Wang were there and she did not dare to be disrespectful towards him in their presence. So she gave him a full account of how her mistress had been taken ill again so suddenly, of how she had destroyed the handkerchiefs and poems, and of the few words she had uttered before her death. Bao-yu cried himself hoarse. Tan-chun now took the opportunity to mention that just before she died Dai-yu had asked for her coffin to be taken to the South. This set Grandmother Jia and Lady Wang weeping again. Luckily Xi-feng was at hand with more words of consolation, and she prevailed upon them to contain their grief. She then politely suggested that they should return to their apartments. Bao-yu could not bring himself to leave. It was only when

Grandmother Jia insisted, that he tore himself away and returned to his apartment.

Grandmother Jia, because of her age, and the state of permanent unrest that had prevailed in the household ever since the onset of Bao-yu's illness, was beginning to show signs of strain. This latest scene of grief and lamentation affected her so deeply that she felt a feverishness and faintness coming on, and for all her concern for Bao-yu she no longer felt equal to the situation, but was forced to retire to her room and sleep. Lady Wang was if anything even more inconsolably affected, and retired likewise, giving Suncloud instructions to help Aroma in looking after Bao-yu, and adding:

'If he seems to be taking it badly again, come and tell me at once.

Bao-chai knew how strong the attachment was that bound Bao-yu to Dai-yu, but rather than try to console him, she continued to take him to task in the same pointed manner as before. He, anxious not to cause her any offence, soon put an end to his weeping and tried to moderate his grief. He went to sleep, and the night passed uneventfully. Early next morning when they came to see how he was, he was still weak and lacking in energy, but seemed to be over the worst. They tended him with renewed care, and gradually he began to recover his strength. Fortunately, Grandmother Jia did not fall sick. It was Lady Wang on whom the shock seemed to leave the most permanent mark.

When Aunt Xue came over to visit the convalescence, she was pleasantly surprised to find him in much better spirits. She stayed for a few days. On one of these days, Grandmother Jia made a point of inviting her for a talk.

'We owe Bao-yu's life to you,' she began. 'He is out of danger now, I think. I only feel sorry for Bao-chai, after the way things have happened. Bao-yu has been convalescing for a hundred days, and is really quite fit again; and now that the mourning period for Her Grace over, we can think of celebrating the Consummation. I should like you to choose a lucky day in the calendar for the occasion.

'Your idea is an excellent one,' returned Aunt Xue 'But why should you ask me? Bao-chai may not be a very clever girl, but she has a sensible nature, and understands these things. I think you must be familiar with her disposition. If the two of them can live in harmony together, it will be such a relief for you, such a comfort to my sister, and it will set my mind at ease too. You must choose the day. Will we be inviting relatives and friends to the celebrations?'

'I think we should,' replied Grandmother Jia. 'After all, it is the most important event in their lives. There have been so many problems and complications, but now at last they all seem to have been resolved. I think we should send out invitations and make a proper party of it. We will invite all our friends and relations. It will be a way of giving thanks, and besides, I feel that I deserve a bit of fun too, as a little reward for all the heartache this has caused me.'

Aunt Xue was very pleased. She went on to talk of her plans for preparing Bao-chai's trousseau.

Grandmother Jia protested:

'As this is all within the family, there is no need for you to go to such trouble. They already have all the furniture they need. By all means bring some of Bao-chai's favourite things. But please don't bother with anything else. Yes, Bao-chai is such a calm, understanding girl, not at all like my poor granddaughter, whose over-sensitive nature was the cause of her death at such a tender age.'

Aunt Xue now began to cry too. Luckily Xi-feng came in at this moment, and inquired with a smile:

'Grandmother, Auntie, what is troubling you?'

'We were talking about Miss Lin,' answered Aunt Xue. 'It is so sad.'

Xi-feng smiled again.

'You must not allow it to upset you. Listen to this - it's a joke I have just heard.'

Grandmother Jia wiped away her tears, and managed a feeble smile.

'Who are you going to make fun of now? Come on, we are listening. If you don't make us laugh, we will not let you off lightly.'

Xi-feng began gesturing with her hands, but was doubled up with laughter before she could get a word out. To learn what it was she had in mind to tell them, you must turn to the next volume.

EXPLICIT QUARTA PARS LAPIDIS HISTORIAE

CHAPTER 99

Unscrupulous minions make use of their master's virtue
to conceal a multitude of sins
And Jia Zheng is alarmed to read his nephew's name
in the 'Peking Gazette'

TO CONTINUE OUR STORY

We told in our previous volume how Xi-feng, finding Grandmother Jia and Aunt Xue somewhat cast down by the mention of Dai-yu's death, had endeavoured to raise their spirits with a humorous anecdote.
'Who else could it be,' she finally managed to say, after much incapacitating mirth, 'but our newly married couple!'
'Well what about them?' asked Grandmother Jia.
Xi-feng began mimicking again.
'Here sits one, here stands t'other .. . One bends this-a-way, one turns that-a-way ... One ...'
Grandmother Jia interrupted her with a loud laugh.
'For heaven's sake get on with the story! If we have to watch you any more, it'll be the death of us!'
'Yes, do stop all this monkeying around,' said Aunt Xue, laughing in spite of herself, 'and get on with your story.'
Xi-feng began again:
'Just now, I was passing through Cousin Bao-yu's apartment when I heard the sound of laughter coming from inside; and wondering who it could be, I took a peep through a little hole in the paper casement. There was Cousin Chai sitting on the edge of the kang, with Bao-yu standing in front of her, holding her sleeve and imploring her: "Oh, Coz! Why won't you *speak* to me? A word from you and I know I should be completely cured!" But she turned away and seemed bent on taking no notice of him whatsoever. He bowed to her, and then came still closer and took hold of her dress, which she tugged away from him at once. You know how unsteady on his feet Bao-yu has been since his last illness well, with this tug he just tumbled right on top of her! She flushed and cried out: "You're worse than ever! You haven't a scrap of *dignity!*"'
At this both Grandmother Jia and Aunt Xue burst out laughing again. Xi-feng went on:
'Then Bao stood up and grinned. "At least I tripped you into *speaking* to me!" he said.'
'My daughter certainly has her foibles,' said Aunt Xue, with a good-humoured smile. 'Now that they're married there's really nothing against a bit of harmless fun. If she could but see her cousin Lian and you, my dear, when the two of you get started...'
Xi-feng blushed.
'Honestly!' she protested laughingly. 'I tell a story to raise your spirits and you turn it against me.'
'Chai is quite right to behave as she does,' put in Grandmother Jia with a chuckle. 'I don't deny that marriage should be based on affection; but there should always be a sense of proportion. I'm glad Chai sets such store by dignity, and it saddens me that Bao-yu should still be such a silly boy - though from some of the things you tell me it seems that he may be improving. Well - any more Stories?'
'Soon there will be no lack of them,' replied Xi-feng. 'When their marriage is consummated, and Bao-yu presents his mother-in-law with a grandchild...'
'You monkey!' exclaimed Grandmother Jia. 'Thinking of your Cousin Lin's death made us both feel sad, and it was thoughtful of you to want to cheer us up. But now you're going too far. Would you have us forget her altogether? You'd better watch your step. She was never very fond of you

while she was alive, and you'd be well advised not to go walking in the Garden alone after this, or her ghost may pounce on you and try to take its revenge!'
'But she never bore a grudge against me,' countered Xi-feng with a smile. 'It was Bao-yu she cursed with her dying breath.'
Grandmother Jia and Aunt Xue took this to be another of her witticisms, and ignored it:
'Don't talk such nonsense. Now off you go and find someone to choose a lucky day for your cousin Bao's party.'
'Yes, Grannie.' After a little more chat Xi-feng went on her way. She despatched one of the servants to consult the almanac; and on the chosen day, the family duly celebrated the (formal if not actual) 'consummation' of Bao-yu and Bao-chai's marriage, and entertained their guests with a banquet and plays. But of this our narrative omits further details.

*

It turns instead to the convalescent Bao-yu.
From time to time Bao-chai would pick up one of his books and engage him in conversation about it, and on these occasions Bao-yu was sufficiently *compos mentis* to sustain a desultory dialogue of sorts. But his mind was unquestionably duller than it had been, a deterioration he himself was unable to account for. Bao-chai argued with herself that the cause lay in the loss of his Magic Jade, but Aroma was less philosophical, and frequently took him to task:
'Where have your wits fled to? If only it was that old weakness of yours that had left you! But you seem to have kept *that* and lost your wits instead!'
Bao-yu did not let remarks such as this rile him, and responded with an inane grin. If he ever showed signs of letting his wild streak get the better of him, he allowed himself to be restrained by Bao-chai's good sense, while as time went by Aroma rebuked him less and less, and confined herself instead to ministering to his practical needs. His other maids had always respected Bao-chai's quiet, demure manner, and now that she was their mistress her gentle and friendly nature won their willing obedience.
Beneath this apparent calm, Bao-yu continued to feel a deep sense of restlessness, and in particular a recurring desire to visit the Garden. Grandmother Jia and the other ladies were afraid that such an expedition might expose him to a chill or fever of some kind, and that the Garden's surroundings would have too gloomy and depressing an effect on his spirits. Dai-yu's coffin was already lodged in a temple outside the city walls, but the Naiad's House and the memories associated with it would be sure to cause him renewed distress and bring on a relapse. So they forbade him to go. Most of the Garden was now deserted. Of Bao-yu's cousins, Bao-qin had already moved out to live with Aunt Xue, while Shi Xiang-yun had gone home on her uncle's return to the capital, and seldom visited the Jias now that the date of her own wedding had been settled. She had been present on Bao-yu's wedding-day and more recently on the day of the party, but on both occasions she had stayed with Grandmother Jia; and her awareness that Bao-yu was now a married man, and she herself betrothed, had inhibited her from indulging in any of her old high-spirited banter. When she saw the newly wed couple, she talked to Bao-chai but scarcely said more than a polite 'hello' to Bao-yu. Xing Xiu-yan had moved in with her aunt Lady Xing after Ying-chun's marriage, while the two Li sisters only ever visited the Garden with their mother, and then would stay for a couple of days with Li Wan before returning home. The Only Garden residents proper were now Li Wan, Tan-chun and Xi-chun. Grandmother Jia had wanted the three of them to move in with her, but with Yuan-chun's death and all the subsequent family excitements of one kind or another, she had not been able to find time to make the necessary arrangements; and now the weather was growing warmer daily and the Garden was beginning to seem less dreary, so she decided to leave things as they were until the autumn. But we anticipate.

*

Jia Zheng had set off for his new provincial posting, travelling by day and resting by night, accompanied by the various aides and secretaries he had engaged before his departure. On his arrival at the provincial capital, he reported to his superiors and immediately proceeded to his new yamen to take ceremonial possession of the official seal and to assume office. His first administrative action was to take stock of the grain lying in all the granaries of the sub-prefectures and shires under his jurisdiction.
Jia Zheng's previous experience as an official had been mainly in the capital, and had been restricted moreover to the theoretical aspects of the metropolitan bureaucracy. His one provincial appointment had been as an Examiner, and his responsibilities then were of a purely academic nature. He therefore had no first-hand knowledge of the practicalities of provincial administration, let alone of the forms of corruption widely tolerated - the cuts taken by middlemen, or the

extortion practised on the ignorant peasantry, to mention but two. He knew of such things in theory only, as evils to be avoided, and was adamant that his would be an incorruptible administration. On arrival he consulted with his private secretaries and issued a public notice strictly forbidding malpractice of any kind, and announcing that any instance of it would be investigated and reported to the authorities.

At first the locally employed clerks were overawed and tried their utmost to ingratiate themselves with the new incumbent, only to discover that the man they were dealing with was totally inflexible. As for Jia Zheng's family servants, they, after years of unprofitable service in the capital, had rubbed their hands with glee at the news of their master's provincial posting and, on the strength of their anticipated profits, had borrowed money to buy clothes and equip themselves in a manner befitting their new station. Money would fall into the laps of a Grain Intendant's staff. Or so they had assumed. But now all their plans were being foiled by their master's blind insistence on enforcing the regulations to the last letter and by his obstinate refusal to accept a single one of the bribes offered by the sub-prefects and magistrates.

The porter, head clerk and other local staff in the yamen made a few mental calculations:

'If this lasts another fortnight, we'll have pawned all our clothes, and our creditors will start to press for payment; what will we do then? There's good money staring us in the face Out there, if we could only lay our hands on it!'

When these locals voiced their concern to the newly arrived staff whom Jia Zheng had personally recruited in the capital, they met with an indignant response:

'*You* haven't staked your last penny on this venture - we're the ones that should be complaining, not you! We paid money to get our jobs, and here we are after more than a month with nothing to show for it. At this rate we won't break even. We might as well hand in our notices tomorrow.'

Which is exactly what they did. The following day they went in a body and tendered their resignations to a bewildered Jia Zheng, who commented somewhat naively:

'Very well. You were free to come. You are free to return. If you find it uncongenial here, please feel under no obligation to stay.'

This group went grumbling on their way. The family servants next held a council of war among themselves:

'It's all very well for *them. They're* free to go. But what about *us*? We can't leave even if we want to.'

Among these servants was a porter by the name of Li Shi (Ten), who soon took a prominent part in the debate.

'You chickens!' he scoffed. 'Don't be so helpless! While that "contract" mob was here I wasn't going to say anything; but now that they've pushed off I don't mind showing you a trick or two! I'll soon have that Master of ours eating out of the palm of my hand! But you've got to back me up. Stick together, and we can all go home with our pockets full. Of course, if you'd rather keep out of this, that's all right by me. I can manage. I can get the better of you lot any day!'

'Come on, Ten old mate! We're depending on you!' groaned the others. 'You know you're the one the Master trusts. If you won't help us, we're done for!'

'All right. But *you*'ve got to trust me too. Don't leave me to do all the dirty work and bring in the money, and then turn on me and say I've taken more than my fair share.'

'No chance of *that.* You know we're broke. Anything's better than nothing.'

As they were speaking, the granary clerk came in, and asked for Mr Zhou. Ten, who was lounging complacently in a chair with one foot propped on his other knee and his chest puffed out, asked him what his business was with Mr Zhou. The clerk stood to attention with his hands at his sides and smiled uneasily.

'The new Intendant has been in office more than a month now,' he replied, 'but not a single granary's been opened to take in the tax-grain. The local magistrates have been made to feel uncomfortable by all his stern pronouncements. They've been quite put off from entering into the usual - how shall I put it? - negotiations. Now, if the grain is not going to be taken in and delivered on time, what's the point of *your* being here at all?'

'What a ridiculous question!' said Ten. 'Our Master the Intendant is a man of his word. Of course he'll meet his commitments. As a matter of fact he was about to issue the Reminders a couple of days ago, but on my advice they were postponed. Now, tell me what you *really* wanted to see Zhou about?'

Clerk: 'Oh, that was it ... the Reminders. Nothing else ..'

Ten: 'Nonsense! Don't try to fool me with that, my lad! And don't come sneaking in here with any nifty little plans, or I'll tell the Intendant to beat you and take your job away.'

Clerk: 'My family has served in this yamen for three generations; I've got a decent position here, I manage to make an honest living. I don't mind going by the book until this Intendant gets promoted and moved somewhere else. I'm not like that beggarly lot who've just left.'

He took formal leave of Li Ten:

‘I’d best be going now, sir.’
Ten stood up, all smiles:
‘Come on now, can’t you take a joke? No need to get rattled by a few words ..’
‘I’m not rattled. I just don’t want to say anything that might compromise you, sir.’
Ten walked over to the clerk and took him confidentially by the hand:
‘Tell me, what’s your name?’
‘Zhan Hui,(* Homophone for ‘bribery’) sir,’ replied the clerk nervously. ‘I spent quite a few years up in the capital myself when I was a boy.’
‘Mr Zhan! Why, of course! I’ve heard of you. Come now, we’re all in this together. If there’s something you want to talk to me about, why not drop by this evening and we can have a nice little chat.’
‘We all know how capable you are, Mr Li,’ replied the clerk aloud, with a sigh of relief. ‘Why, you really had me worried there for a minute!’
He left amidst general laughter.
That evening Zhan returned and he and Li were closeted together deep into the night. The next day, when Li found some pretext to call on Jia Zheng, and hinted at some of the ‘measures’ he had in mind, predictably he received a stern reprimand.
The following day, Jia Zheng was due to pay a formal visit in the town, and he issued orders for his retinue to make themselves ready. A considerable interval of time elapsed, and the gong in the inner yamen was struck three times, but still there was no sign of anyone to beat the drum in the main hall. Someone was finally found to perform this duty, and Jia Zheng came walking out of his private chambers with measured stride, to find that there was only one attendant waiting for him, instead of the usual team of runners and criers. Resolving not to pursue this dereliction for the time being, Jia Zheng stepped into the sedan at the foot of the terrace and waited for his chair-bearers. Another long interval elapsed before these had all assembled and were ready to carry him out of the yamen, and the Intendant’s solemn departure was then announced by a single feeble report from the cannon, while a grand total of two members of the ceremonial band, a drummer and a bugler, put in a forlorn appearance on the bandstand. Jia Zheng was now extremely annoyed.
‘Things have been in perfect order until today. What’s the meaning of this shambles?’
His insignia-bearers, such as they were, straggled across the road in an unseemly fashion. Jia Zheng concluded his visit as best he could, and immediately upon his return summoned the defaulters and threatened them with a flogging. Some pleaded that they had been unable to attend because they lacked the requisite headgear, others that they had been forced to pawn their uniforms, while some claimed that they had not eaten for three days and were therefore too weak for heavy carrying duties. Jia Zheng vented his anger on them verbally, ordered a couple of them to be flogged and left it at that.
The next day the chief cook came asking for more money, and Jia Zheng had to provide him with some of the personal reserve he had brought with him from home. From then on, one such incident followed another and it soon became apparent that most departments of his provincial yamen were in total disarray. In the end he was driven to send for Porter Li, and asked him outright:
‘What’s come over my staff? You must try to instil some sense of discipline in them. And another thing: my reserve of cash has run Out, and it will be some time before my salary arrives from the Provincial Treasurer’s office, so we shall have to send home for extra funds.’
‘I’ve had words with the staff almost every day, sir,’ replied Li. ‘But I can’t do a thing with them. They seem to have lost all interest in their work. Gone to pieces, sir. As for the money, may I ask how much you will be requiring? I understand the Viceroy has a birthday coming up in a few days’ time, and the Prefects and Circuit Intendants are mostly giving four-figure donations. How much will you be sending, sir?’
Jia Zheng: ‘You should have told me of this earlier.’
Li: ‘With respect, sir, it’s the fault of the local mandarins. They’ve not kept you informed. It’s because we’re new here and haven’t made any effort to get to know them. It wouldn’t surprise me if they had an eye on your job and were even hoping you would fail to attend the Viceroy’s birthday altogether, sir ...’
Jia Zheng: ‘That’s preposterous! I was appointed by His Majesty. I am hardly to be relieved of my post for not attending the Viceroy’s birthday!’
Li (with a smile): ‘That’s all very well, sir. The trouble is that with the capital such a long way off, His Majesty relies on the Viceroy for all his information. If the Viceroy speaks ill of a person, there’s not much hope of that person being able to defend himself, whatever the truth might he. Now I’m sure Her Old Ladyship and Their Ladyships want to see you do well for yourself here ..
Jia Zheng began to see what he was driving at:
‘Why couldn’t you have said all this before?’

Li: ‘At first I didn’t dare, sir. Seeing that you asked me, it would have been wrong of me not to speak up. But I’m sure what I’ve got to say is only going to make you angry.’
Jia Zheng: ‘Not if it is reasonable. Go on.’
Li: ‘Well, sir: the truth of the matter is that the staff in a Grain Intendant’s yamen expect to make a bit on the side. Your clerks and runners have all paid money for their jobs. They’ve got families to look after and livings to earn. And so far as they’re concerned, sir, since you’ve been here, all you’ve done is set the local people grumbling.’
Jia Zheng: ‘What do you mean? Grumbling about what?’
Li: ‘The way the locals see it is quite simple. Officials all behave like that when they first arrive. The stricter they sound, the more certain it is that they’re on the squeeze, trying to browbeat the mandarins working in the district. When the time comes for the tax-grain to be collected, the yamen staff will repeat your instructions, they’ll swear that they’re not allowed to take a penny; and it will only mean a lot of unnecessary trouble and delay for the country people, who’d much rather have things the old way - pay up a bit and get the whole thing over and done with as quickly as possible. So, in short, instead of speaking well of you, they just complain that you haven’t understood their situation.
‘Look at that smart relation of yours, sir - that Mr Jia Yu-cun you’ve always been so friendly with. In a few years he’s done very well for himself, and all because he’s shrewd. He’s got a good sense of what’s what in the world, he knows how t6 handle his superiors and staff and how to keep everything running smoothly ...’
Jia Zheng: ‘This is ridiculous! Are you suggesting that I possess no such sense? Harmony is one thing: but I draw the line at collusion!’
Li: ‘It’s only my concern for you that causes me to speak my mind, sir. If I stand by and let you carry on like this, if I don’t even warn you and if your career is ruined as a result, you’ll think very poorly of me.’
Jia Zheng: ‘Well: what precisely are you suggesting?’
Li: ‘My advice is to take immediate action; do the sensible thing, secure your own interests *now*, while you’re in your prime and still in favour at court, and while Her Old Ladyship still enjoys good health. Otherwise, before the year’s out, you may find you’ve used all your own funds to cover official expenses. No one in the government service will have the slightest sympathy for you then. No one will believe that you’re poor. They’ll all think that you’re sitting on a secret pile of money; and if anything goes wrong, none of them will come forward to help you. You’ll find it impossible to clear yourself, and by then it’ll be too late to wish you’d followed my advice.’
Jia Zheng: ‘In short, what you are saying is that I must allow myself to be corrupted! The consequences for myself of such a dereliction of duty, even death itself, I consider as nothing compared with the disgrace that would tarnish my family’s honour.’
Li: ‘You’re a wise man, sir. If it’s family honour you’re bothered about, then think back for a moment to that group of officials who got themselves into such disgrace a few years ago; good friends of yours they were, good men, men you used to call “above corruption”. Where’s *their* family honour now? But certain other relatives of yours, men you used to call “downright rogues”, have done very well for themselves, gone from strength to strength. What’s been their secret? They just knew how to adapt. You’ve got to look after the common people, but you’ve got to look after the local mandarins as well. If your ideas came into general fashion and the shire or district mandarins were strictly forbidden to take even the tiniest squeeze, why, nothing would *ever* get done in the provinces!
‘You keep things respectable on the outside, and leave all the inside work to me. I’ll manage things so you don’t have to be personally involved. I am only trying to be helpful, sir. It’s the least I owe you after being with you all these years.
J ia Zheng hesitated. ‘I suppose I too must look to my own survival,’ he said in the end. ‘Do whatever you must. But I will play no part in it.
He walked stiffly back into his private chambers.
Li Ten now came into his own and began to implement his plans with a vengeance. He had soon organized, behind Jia Zheng’s back, an elaborate squeeze Operation involving yamen staff and local mandarins. On the surface, day-to-day business in the yamen began running smoothly again, so smoothly that Jia Zheng allowed himself to set his mind at rest and, far from Suspecting that anything was amiss, put absolute faith in Li. Any irregularities reported to his superiors were discounted by them in view of Jia Zheng’s record for scrupulous honesty. His private secretaries had a shrewder idea of what was going on and tried to caution him. When he refused to listen, some of them resigned, others decided to stay on for friendship’s sake. Thus it was that the tax-grain for that year was eventually collected and shipped to the capital without any apparent mishap.

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One day, in one of his free moments, Jia Zheng was sitting in his study reading, when the chief clerk sent in a letter. It bore an official seal and the superscription:

From the Commandant of Haimen and surrounding Coastal Region
To the Yamen of the lciangsi Grain Intendant
By Express Delivery

Jia Zheng opened the envelope and examined its contents:

Honoured Sir,
Last year when duty called me to the capital, I was privileged, on the strength of our common Nanking origin, to enjoy your hospitality on a number of occasions. At that time you graciously favoured my suggestion that the connection between our two families he further strengthened by a matrimonial alliance. I have since then had this constantly in the forefront of my mind, but was reluctant to press the matter after my transfer to maritime defence in this remote region. That circumstances should have put such an obstacle in the way of our plans has been a source of great regret to me. Now that the light of your noble presence illumines these southern skies, however, that obstacle has been removed. I had been thinking to write and send you my felicitations, when I received your letter.
From his bivouac an old soldier raises his hand in humble salute! Even on these distant shores, I feel myself basking in the genial warmth of your benevolence.
Dare I hope for your consent if I now propose this alliance once more? My son was favoured, I recall, with your gracious approval, and we have long anticipated the great joy that your daughter's charming presence would bring to our household.
If you are kind enough to confirm your acceptance, I shall despatch a go-between without delay. Though the journey is a long one for your daughter, it can he accomplished by boat. And though I cannot offer much in the way of pomp and ceremony, I can at least send a suitably furnished barge to receive her.
This brief missive carries my most sincere congratulations on your new appointment. In eager anticipation of your favourable response, believe me to be, honoured sir, your most humble and respectful servant,

Zhou Qiong.

'Fate seems indeed to play a decisive role in affairs of matrimony,' reflected Jia Zheng to himself after perusing the letter. 'I do remember suggesting this betrothal last year. There seemed to be several factors in its favour: Zhou was taking up an appointment in the capital, he and I were old friends and both from Nanking families, and his son was a good-looking enough young man. It was only a casual suggestion, and I never mentioned it at home. Afterwards he was transferred to Maritime Defence and the matter was dropped. And yet now an unforeseeable stroke of fate has sent me here to the provinces, and Zhou has broached the subject once more. Theirs seems a suitable family, and I think it would be a good match for Tan-chun. But I am here on my own, and I shall have to write home to consult them first.'
He was still deliberating, when one of the gate-attendants came in with an official despatch summoning him to a conference with the Viceroy, and he had to set out at once for the Viceroy's seat. After his arrival there, he was awaiting further instructions and sitting in his temporary lodgings, idly leafing through a pile of *Peking Gazettes* that lay on the table, when his eye was caught by a report from the Board of Punishments:
'In the case of Xue Pan, travelling on business, registered domicile Nanking...'
'Good heavens!' exclaimed Jia Zheng in some alarm. 'Have they memorialized already?'
He read on more carefully. The gist of the report was that Xue Pan, having killed Zhang San 'in an affray', had connived with the relatives of the deceased and other eyewitnesses to get himself off on a charge of 'accidental homicide'. Jia Zheng brought his hand down with a thump on the table.
'He's done for!'
He read the report through to the end:

The Metropolitan Govemor has forwarded the following abstract of the case:
Xue Pan of Nanking, while travelling through the town of Tal-ping, stayed at Li's Inn. One of the waiters employed by Gaffer Li the proprietor was a certain Zhang San, with whom Xue was not previously acquainted. On the __ day of the __month of the year __ , Xue Pan placed an order with the proprietor for some wine, as he had invited Wu Liang (a native of Tai-ping) to drink with him. When his guest came, he sent the waiter Zhang San to bring them the wine. The wine was

sour, and Xue Pan told him to replace it with something better. Zhang San argued that since that particular wine had been ordered, it was impossible to change it. Xue Pan considered Zhang's behaviour insolent and raised his cup to throw the wine in his face. Unfortunately he exerted too much force and the cup slipped from his hand just as Zhang lowered his head to retrieve a chopstick from the ground. The cup struck Zhang on the top of the head, there was a substantial loss of blood, and he died shortly afterwards. Gaffer Li hurried to the scene but was too late to be of any help. He informed Mrs Zhang, nee Wang, the deceased's mother, who came to the inn only to find her son already dead. She called **Out** the beadle and brought a plaint at the local yamen. The then acting magistrate held an inquest and the coroner completed the usual certificate. Two crucial facts were, however, omitted: first, that the bregmatic fracture was one and one-third inches long; and second, that Zhang had also sustained injuries *in the small of the back*. The case was then sent up to the prefectural yamen, where it was confirmed that Xue Pan had only intended to throw the wine, that the cup had slipped from his hand, and that he had therefore accidentally caused the death of Zhang San. He was dealt with according to the law relating to Accidental Homicide, and permitted to pay a fine in commutation.

The Board has investigated the evidence given by the accused, by the various eyewitnesses and by the relatives of the deceased, and has found it to be inconsistent. It has also consulted the detailed provisions of the code relating to homicide, wherein a fight is defined as a 'struggle between two persons', and an affray as a 'struggle in which the parties strike one another'. There must be no evidence of such a fight or struggle if the offence is to be classified as accidental homicide. The case was therefore handed back to the office of the Metropolitan Governor to establish the exact facts, on the basis of which a final recommendation for sentence could be reached.

This is the substance of the Governor's final findings: Xue Pan was already intoxicated when Zhang San refused to replace the wine. Seizing Zhang by the tight hand, he *struck him in the small of the back*. Whereupon Zhang began to abuse Xue Pan, who then *hurled his wine cap at his'*, inflicting a severe wound on his skull. The bone was fractured, causing damage to the brain and immediate death. In other words, Zhang's death was directly caused by the force with which Xue Pan threw the cup. Xue Pan should therefore pay for this crime with his life. In accordance with the code relating to Homicide by Blows, he should be kept in custody until the Assizes, and then executed by strangulation. Wu Liang should be flogged and sentenced to penal servitude.

The Prefectural, Shire and District Magistrates implicated in this miscarriage of Justice should be dealt with as follows ...

The report broke off at this point with the note 'To be continued'.

Jia Zheng reflected that it was he who, at Aunt Xue's request, had brought pressure to bear on the local magistrate to reverse the verdict in Xue Pan's case. If that magistrate had now been cashiered, and an enquiry had been held, he could be implicated himself. It was very worrying. He read through the next issue of the *Gazette*, but there was no further mention of the case. He searched through all the remaining issues without being able to find the conclusion of the report. He began to feel more and more uneasy, and was deep in thought when Li Ten came in and said:

'Will you please proceed to the yamen to attend on the Viceroy, sir? His attendants have already beaten the drum twice.'

J ia Zheng was miles away and heard none of this. Li had to repeat himself.

'What can I do?' muttered Jia Zheng to himself.

'Is something the matter, sir?' asked Li.

Jia Zheng confided to Li his anxiety about the report in the *Gazette*.

'Don't you worry too much about that, sir,' said Li. 'In fact, if you ask me, Mr Xue was quite lucky. Back in the capital I heard that he invited a lot of women along to that very inn and that they were all there together getting drunk and causing quite a rumpus on the very evening when he beat this waiter to death. And I heard that the local mandarin was not the only one to do the family a favour. Apparently Mr Lian spent a small fortune on the case, and sent bribes to every yamen concerned, to try to get Mr Pan off. It's funny the Board hasn't mentioned that in its report. I suppose in one way it's only to be expected. Now this affair has come to light, the people involved must all be busy covering up for each other. They're trying to sweep the whole thing under the carpet. They want to make it seem like a minor case of negligence. Then the worst that can happen to them is that they'll lose their jobs. They'd never want to admit to bribes being taken. Much too serious. Don't you worry about this one, sir, I'll get hold of the inside story. We'd best not keep the Viceroy waiting any longer ..'.

'You don't understand,' said Jia Zheng. 'It's the local magistrate I feel sorry for. For doing us this favour, he has forfeited his job. And that may not even he the end of it for him.'

'It won't do any good worrying about him, sir,' said Li. 'Your attendants have been waiting for a long time. You'd best be going in to see the Viceroy now, sir.'

To learn what it was the Viceroy wanted of Jia Zheng, please read the next chapter.

CHAPTER 100

Caltrop disturbs an elaborate seduction
and inspires bitter resentment
Bao-yu learns of a distressing betrothal
and laments an imminent departure

Jia Zheng was with the Viceroy for a long time, and outside the yamen speculation mounted as to the reason for the summons. Li Ten, in the absence of any information, assumed that his master was wanted in connection with this latest trouble in the *Gazette*, and feared the worst. At last the interview was over, and Li hurried forward to meet Jia Zheng and accompany him home. He was too impatient to wait until their return, and as soon as they were alone he asked Jia Zheng:
'What kept you so long, sir? Something of great importance, I suppose?'
Jia Zheng smiled.
'Not really. It turns out that the Commandant of the Haimen region, who has offered his son's hand in marriage to my daughter, is himself related to the Viceroy, and has written asking him to take a special interest in my well-being. The Viceroy was most affable, and even went so far as to say to me: "Now we are related too!"
Li rejoiced inwardly, seeing in this new turn of events cause to be bolder still in his own schemes. He encouraged Jia Zheng enthusiastically to proceed with the marriage.
Communications between Kiangsi and the capital were slow, and it was hard for Jia Zheng to know whether or not he was personally implicated in Xue Pan's troubles. At such a great distance it would be difficult for him to influence the course of events in Xue Pan's favour. When he returned to his own yamen, he despatched a family servant to the capital to ascertain exactly what had happened, and at the same time to carry a message to Grandmother Jia, informing her of the marriage proposal. If she agreed, he suggested that Tan-chun should be sent straight away to join him, in preparation for the wedding. The servant set off with all speed for the capital. He reported first to Lady Wang, and then went to the Board of Civil Office, where his enquiries revealed that the only person to have suffered in the Xue Pan affair was the acting magistrate of Tai-ping, who had lost his job, and that Jia Zheng was not in any way implicated. The servant sent back a reassuring report to Jia Zheng, himself remaining behind to await further developments.

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It will be remembered to what lengths Aunt Xue had gone, and with what large sums of money she had bribed the various courts involved, to bring in a verdict of 'accidental homicide' in the earlier stages of Xue Pan's case. She had been proposing to raise the money for his fine by selling the family pawnshop business. Now when she heard of the new verdict brought by the Board of Punishments, she sent still more bribes, but to no avail. The sentence was confirmed--death by strangulation after the Autumn Assizes. Day and night she wept tears of grief and rage.
Bao-chai visited her several times and tried to offer consolation:
'Brother Pan must have been born under an unlucky star, Mama! With the fortune that Grandpa left, he should have been able to lead a quiet and comfortable life. But instead it's been one disaster after another. First came Nanking and that disgraceful business over Caltrop. He was entirely to blame for that poor young man's death, and it was just lucky for him that we still had plenty of pull and money in those days, and were able to get him off.
'You'd have thought a scrape like that would have been enough to make him mend his ways. You'd have thought he might have taken life a bit more seriously after that and devoted more time to looking after his own mother. But no, as soon as we arrived here, it was the same story all over again. I hate to think how much you've suffered on his account, Mama, how many tears you've shed. Then he got married, and at last we thought life might quieten down a bit for all of us. But fate evidently had something else in mind. Eventually that dreadful woman drove him away with her insufferable carryings on.
'And even *that* was not the end of it. As the saying goes: "Fate moves in a narrow lane, and

collisions are hard to avoid!" It was only a few days before he was mixed up in this new murder case! You and Cousin Ke have done everything you possibly could. Apart from all the money you've spent, you've never stopped asking for help and thinking of ways to get him out. You can't go on struggling with fate. He'll have to pay the price for his own misdeeds.

'Most parents look to their children for support in their old age, and even in poor families a man will do his best to earn his mother a bowl of rice. But what has Pan done? Squandered a ready-made fortune, and made your life a misery. I know I shouldn't say this, but the truth is, he's the bane of your life, an affliction sent to test you, not a real son to you. You refuse to accept the truth, and wear yourself out like this, weeping at all hours of the day and night. You've got quite enough to cope with already, what with Jin-gui and her tantrums. It worries me so, seeing you in this state. I only wish I could be here with you all the time, and help keep the peace. But I can't. Bao-yu would never let me come back, however halfwitted he may be.

'The other day Sir Zheng sent a message home to say how shocked he was to read the report in the *Gazette*. He has already sent one of his men to try to intervene on Pan's behalf. So you see - there are so many people trying to help Pan Out of this mess he's made. And thank goodness I'm at least close by. I think if I were living a long way off and heard that this had happened, I'd simply die worrying about you. Please, Mama, give yourself a moment's respite. Be thankful that Pan is still alive. Use this opportunity to take stock. Ask one of the older men in the firm to find Out what we owe and what we are owed, and see exactly how much we have left.'

'Dear girl,' said Aunt Xue tearfully, 'the past few days I have been so preoccupied with your brother I simply haven't had time to tell you of our own troubles. Whenever you've come to see me it's either been you trying to cheer me up or me giving you the latest news from the yamen. I haven't told you the worst. We have been struck off the register of court purveyors. Two of our pawnshops have been sold and we have already spent the money from the sale, while the manager of the other pawnshop has run off with thousands of taels and we're involved in another court case over that. Your cousin Ke has been out every day trying to collect some of the money owing to us. Our liabilities here will probably amount to several tens of thousands of taels, and we shall have to sell our share of the Nanking joint-stock business and some property as well, in order to meet our obligations. Two days ago I even heard a rumour that the pawnbroking side of the Nanking business has g6ne bankrupt and been closed down! If that turns out to be true, I really have come to the end of the road!'

Aunt Xue began weeping hysterically. Ba-chai was also in tears by now, but tried to comfort her:

'There's no sense in your distressing yourself about the finances, Mama. Let Cousin Ke take care of that. Though I must say it *is* distressing to see our employees abandon us and turn against us the moment we're down on our luck. I can understand them wanting to save their own skins; but I know that some of them are actually encouraging outsiders to cheat us out of our money. As for Pan's friends, it's a waste of time expecting any help from them. The only thing they're any good for is parties. The first sign of trouble and they're of£.

'If you love me, Mama, please listen to my words of advice. At your age it's time you took more care of yourself and worried about others less. Remember, even if the worst comes to the worst, you'll manage somehow or other. Forget about the clothes and furniture. Let Jin-gui have them. Not many of the servants or serving-women will want to stay on, so you may as well let most of them go too. I feel sorry for Caltrop. After everything she's been through, I think you should keep her on with you. If you ever run short of anything, I can always help out, provided we've got it at home. I'm sure *he* wouldn't mind. And Aroma is a decent sort of girl. She knows about our troubles; in fact the slightest mention of your name brings tears to her eyes. *He* doesn't know that anything's the matter, so he hasn't been particularly worried. If he were to learn the truth, I think the shock might be too much for him.'

'Dear girl,' said Aunt Xue, not waiting for her to finish, 'whatever you do, don't tell him. He nearly died on account of Miss Lin. He's a little better now. If he were to have a sudden relapse, it would be such a trial for you! And then if you had to spend all your time nursing him, I should be robbed of my last source of comfort.'

'I've thought of that,' replied Bao-chai. 'That's why I haven't told him.'

At that very moment Xue Pan's wife Jin-gui came running into the outer room, screaming:

'What's the good of being alive? My man's done for now anyway. It's no use pretending! The least we can do is march along to the execution ground and put up a fight! We've got nothing to lose!'

With this she began banging her head against the wooden partition, till her hair came undone and fell in disorder about her shoulders. Aunt Xue could only stare at her in speechless rage, while Bao-chai tried to reason with her 'dear sister-in-law', her 'good sister-in-law', all to no avail.

'Dear Mrs Bao!' retorted Jin-gui. 'We all know how well you've done for yourself. You and your *dear* Mr Bao will live happily ever after, I dare say! But I'm all on my own. I'm long past caring about appearances!'

She announced her intention of returning to her mother's, and made a dash for the street. Luckily there were enough people present to stop her, and eventually they managed to calm her down. Bao-qin, who was at this time still staying with Aunt Xue, in preparation for her own wedding, was so horrified by Jin-gui's behaviour that she resolved to keep well out of her way from then on.

Whenever Xue Ke was at home, Jin-gui would select one of her more provocative gowns and issue forth, her cheeks heavily powdered and rouged, her eyebrows pencilled, her hair dressed in its most alluring style. She would contrive to walk past his apartment, where she would give an artificial-sounding cough, or ask innocently who was inside. If she encountered him in person, she would at once waylay him and attempt to beguile him with seductive small-talk, simpering, pouting and purring by turns, displaying for his benefit the full range of her feminine charms. When the maids saw what she was up to, they beat a hasty retreat. Jin-gui carried on regardless, intent on executing Moonbeam's plan for the conquest of Xue Ke. He for his part avoided her if he could, and if he could not, endeavoured to be civil, Out of a fear that she might otherwise cause worse trouble for him.

But Jin-gui's infatuation blinded her to the truth, so that Xue Ke's courteous manner only fanned the flames of her desire. The one thing she could not help noticing, however, the one detail that marred the illusion, was the way in which the object of her passion entrusted every smailest thing of his to Caltrop. The sorting, mending and washing of his clothes, all were given to her. And if she, Jin-gui, entered the room while the two of them were talking, she noticed how they hurriedly went their separate ways, as if she had intruded on some intimate tete-a'-te'te. All of this inflamed her jealousy. She could not, however, bring herself to confront Xue Ke directly about it, for fear that any move against Caltrop might set Xue Ke against herself. Instead she decided to bide her time, and continued to accumulate a deep and bitter store of resentment towards her rival.

One day Moonbeam came into her room and tittered:

'Mrs Pan, have you seen Master Ke?'

Jin-gui: 'I have not.'

Moonbeam: 'I told you he was fooling us with all that strait-laced talk of his. When *we* sent him some wine, he said he didn't drink; but just now I saw him at Mrs Xue's, quite tipsy and **red** in the face. If you don't believe me, why, go and wait for him in the doorway. He'll be coming this way. Stop him and ask him. See what he says.'

Jin-gui (annoyed): 'I'm sure he won't be coming out just yet. Anyway, he's such a cold fish. Words are wasted on him.'

Moonbeam: 'You're just being silly again, ma'am. Why not give it a try? If he plays, we can play too. If not, we'll just have to think of another way.'

Perhaps she's right after all, Jin-gui thought to herself. She posted Moonbeam outside to keep watch for Xue Ke, and went in once more to her dressing-table. She opened her mirror and looked herself up and down. A little more lipstick, a flowery handkerchief, and she was ready for the fray. Or almost ready: she still felt there was something missing, but before she could think what it was that she needed to add that final touch, she heard Moonbeam's voice outside:

'You seem in high spirits today, Master Ke! Been drinking somewhere, have you?'

This was her cue. Jin-gui raised the *portiere* and stepped out just in time to hear Xue Ke's reply:

'Our manager Mr Zhang is celebrating his birthday today, and I was pressed into drinking half a cup. My face is still burning from it.'

Before he had finished, Jin-gui moved into the attack:

'Other people's wine has more flavour than ours, I dare say ...' Xue Ke felt the sting of her remark and blushed a deeper shade of **red.** He took a step towards her and said with a polite smile:

'Of course not, sister-in-law.'

Now that the conversation was launched, Moonbeam disappeared inside and left them to it. Jin-gui had intended to feign anger with her darling, but there was something so appealingly boyish about the flush on his cheeks and the slightly befuddled innocence in his eyes, that her heart melted and her feigned hostility fled to the distant land of Java. She smiled.

'You mean, you have to be led to water ..'

'Precisely. I'm really no drinker.'

'I'm glad to hear it. Better than your cousin, anyway, forever boozing his way into trouble. At least *your* wife won't be left to sleep in an empty bed ...'

She narrowed her eyes at him suggestively, and her cheeks began to glow. Xue Ke saw serious danger ahead, and decided to make a dash for it while he still could. But he was too slow. Jin-gui was not going to let him slip through her fingers now! In a second she was on him and had him in her clutches.

'Sister-in-law!' cried Xue Ke in consternation. 'This is most undignified!'

He was trembling all over. Jin-gui threw caution to the winds.

‘Come in here with me. There’s something important I have to tell you.

Things had reached this critical juncture when a voice behind her called:
‘Mrs Pan! It’s Caltrop. She’s coming this way!’
Jin-gui glanced wildly behind her. Moonbeam had lifted the *portiere* to observe the course the interview was taking; and then when she caught sight of Caltrop coming from the other direction, had hastened to warn Jin-gui. Jin-gui in her panic relaxed her grip, and Xue Ke seized his chance of escape. Caltrop herself had noticed nothing and had been walking innocently on her way until Moonbeam called out, when she looked round and to her horror saw Jin-gui dragging Xue Ke into her boudoir. Caltrop immediately turned about and, heart thumping, began walking back in the direction she had come from. Jin-gui stood there a while, and stared in angry dismay after the vanishing form of Xue Ke. Then she gave a snort of exasperation and withdrew to her apartment, smarting with thwarted desire. Caltrop, who had come through the side gate and was making her way to Bao-qin’s when she stumbled upon them, hurried back to her room.

Resentment towards Caltrop now festered within Jin-gui’s bosom, and the poison worked its way into the very marrow of her being.

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Later that same day, Bao-chai was in Grandmother Jia’s apartment, and heard Lady Wang speaking of the betrothal Jia Zheng had proposed for Tan-chun.

‘I’m glad the boy’s from a Nanking family,’ said Grandmother Jia. ‘But if he came here once before, I can’t understand why Zheng has never mentioned it.’

‘We knew nothing about it either,’ said Lady Wang.

‘I can see advantages in the match,’ said Grandmother Jia. ‘The only objection is the dreadful distance involved. I know that Zheng is posted there at present. But supposing he is transferred later on, poor Tan will be so isolated.’

‘With official families, there’s no telling where they may be posted,’ replied Lady Wang. ‘The boy’s father may also be recalled to the capital. Even if he isn’t, one way or another “the falling leaf returns to the root”, as they say: they’re bound to come home sooner or later. Besides, Zheng’s superior is in favour of the match, and it would be very difficult for him to refuse. I think he has more or less made up his mind already, and has only written to you for your formal approval, Mother.’

‘If you are both in favour of it,’ said Grandmother Jia, ‘then well and good. It grieves me, though, to think how long it may be before Tan is able to come back and visit us. If it is more than a year or two, I fear I may no longer be alive to see her.’

She wept as she spoke.

‘Marriage is something that happens to every girl once she grows up,’ said Lady Wang, ‘and even if the husband’s family is a local one, you can never be sure that the two of them will stay in the district. He may always be posted away from home. That’s one of the hazards of official life. The most important thing is that they should be happy together. Take Ying-chun’s case. Her husband lives nearby. But that has not meant happiness for her. They never seem to stop fighting, and now he won’t even feed her properly, and forbids her to touch any of the things we send. And from what I hear, things are getting worse. He won’t allow her to come and visit us, and when the two of them quarrel, he pointedly reminds her that we owe his family money. Poor child! The future looks very bleak for her. The other day I was worried on her account and sent some of my women to call at the Sun home. Ying-chun was hiding in a side-room and wouldn’t come out to see them. They insisted on going in, and found her freezing to death, poor thing, with nothing on but some threadbare old clothes. And it was a bitterly cold day! She broke down in front of them and begged them not to reveal her miserable plight to us at home. “It’s my fate to suffer like this,” she said. And we’re not to send her any more clothes or food or anything. They never reach her, and

her husband will only accuse her of complaining again and give her another beating. So you see, Mother, Ying may be close at hand, but the very closeness only makes her suffering harder for us to bear. Her mother turns a blind eye, and her father has refused to intervene at all. She is worse off than one of our lowest-grade maids!

'Although Tan is not my own daughter, I'm sure Zheng wants to do the best for her. He has obviously seen the boy and must approve of him or he wouldn't be in favour of the match. So I hope you'll agree, and then we can choose a lucky day for her to make the journey and send a proper escort to accompany her to Zheng's official residence. I am sure Zheng will see to it at his end that everything is done in a fitting manner.'

'Very well then,' Grandmother Jia concurred. 'I'll go along with Zheng's idea, and I leave it to you to make the necessary arrangements. Choose a suitable day in the almanac for travelling. There, the matter is settled now.'

'Yes, Mother.'

Bao-chai heard all this clearly, and although she did not breathe a word of protest, she thought to herself sadly:

'Tan is one of the very best of us. And now she is being married as well and sent away. One by one our numbers are dwindling.'

Seeing that Lady Wang had risen and was taking her leave, Baochai accompanied her out of the room and then returned immediately to her own apartment. She said nothing to Bao-yu of Tan-chun's engagement, but told Aroma later, when she found her sewing on her own. Aroma too was very unhappy at the news.

Aunt Zhao, on the other hand, was positively delighted.

'The girl's shown me nothing but disrespect,' she thought to herself. 'No one would ever have guessed that I was her mother! I receive worse treatment at her hands than one of her maids! She's always trying to better herself, and sides with anyone rather than her own mother or brother. With her in the way, Huan would never have been able to get anywhere. If her father has sent for her, then good riddance! I've given up hoping for any respect from her. I hope she's as miserable as Ying is. I'd be glad to see it happen.'

She hurried over to Tan-chun's apartment to offer her 'congratulations'.

'You certainly are on your way up in the world, my dear!' she crowed. 'I'm sure life at your new home will be even more to your liking than it is here. You must be pleased. Now remember, I *am* your mother, for all the good it's ever done me. So don't think of me as *all* bad. And don't forget about me altogether when you're gone.'

Tan-chun refused to respond to this display of Spite and kept her head bent silently over her needlework. Aunt Zhao was effectively snubbed and left the room in a state of high dudgeon.

Tan-chun could see the ridiculous side of her mother's behaviour, but none the less it left her feeling both angry and wounded, and she sat for some time weeping quietly to herself. Eventually she walked out in a weary and dejected frame of mind, thinking she would like to drop in on Bao-yu.

'Tell me, Tan,' he said, the moment she entered his apartment, 'I know that you were with Cousin Lin when she died, and that you heard music in the distance. Do you think there was some unexplained mystery behind it? Do you think Cousin Lin was really a fairy, and that at her death she was merely returning to her heavenly abode?'

Tan-chun smiled.

'That sounds like another of your fancies. It was a Strange night, though, that's certainly true; and the music was unlike any that I've ever heard before. Who knows, you may even be right.'

Bao-yu took this as confirmation of his hypothesis. He also recalled the words of the man he had encountered in his strange dream of a few months before, who had said that Dai-yu was 'no ordinary mortal and no ordinary shade, but a visitor from some immortal realm'. This mingled in his mind with another vivid memory, that of the Moon Goddess in the play he had seen the previous year. The Goddess and Dai-yu possessed the same ethereal beauty, the same otherworldly charm ... After a while, when Tanchun had gone, he felt a sudden and overwhelming urge to have Nightingale close at hand, and asked Grandmother Jia to send her over to his apartment.

Nightingale was unwilling, on this as on previous occasions, to comply with Bao-yu's request; but she could hardly disobey an order emanating from Grandmother Jia and Lady Wang. Whenever she was in Bao-yu's presence, she did nothing but sigh, in a way that seemed to express both grief (for her mistress) and disapproval (of Bao-yu). When they were alone together, and Bao-yu took her by the hand and asked her very tenderly to speak to him about Dai-yu, she always refused to confide in him. Bao-chai observed this attitude of hers, and far from being cross, commended her to others for her loyalty to her mistress. As for Snowgoose, although ~t was she who had come forward to assist at the wedding, Bao-chai thought her rather a silly sort of girl and asked Grandmother Jia and Lady Wang to marry her off to one of the pages and set them up on their own somewhere. Nannie Wang had been retained to escort Dai-yu's coffin to the South at a later

date, while Dai-yu's junior maids were transferred to Grandmother Jia's apartment.

Bao-yu's grief for Dai-yu and his general state of gloom were further compounded when he considered this dispersal of the remaining occupants of the Naiad's House. Then suddenly her death struck him in a new light: Dai-yu had been (or so Tan-chun had told him) peffectly lucid at her moment of death; this lucidity, when combined with the strange music, constituted conclusive proof that she had left this world to return to a higher one; and *that* surely was cause for joy! His new-found joy was short-lived, however, for presently he overheard Bao-chai and Aroma in the next room discussing the impending marriage of Tan-chun. With a cry of dismay, he fell back weeping on the kang. Bao-chai and Aroma came hurrying in to support him, with cries of 'What's the matter?', but he was too distraught to reply. After a while he composed himself sufficiently to speak:

'This is the final blow! One by one all my sisters and cousins have been taken away from me! Cousin Lin has joined the ranks of the fairies; my eldest sister has died - though it's true that even in her lifetime we had little enough chance to be together; Ying is coupled with that brute; now Tan is being sent to the ends of the earth to be married, and I shall never set eyes on her again! As for Xiang-yun, who knows where she will end up? Bao-qin is engaged to be married and won't be with us much longer. Will no one be spared? Am I to be left here all on my own?'

Aroma was ready with words of comfort, but Bao-chai silenced her with a wave of her hand:

'Don't humour him. Let me ask him a question instead.'

She turned to Bao-yu.

'What is it that you want exactly? Do you expect all your cousins to stay here and grow up into old maids, just in order to keep you company in your dotage? Don't they have your gracious permission to marry and lead their own lives? Tan is the first of your sisters to be sent such a long way from home, and since it's Father's decision there's no going against it. As for the others, has it never occurred to you that they might have plans of their own? You're not the only person in the world with feelings of brotherly love, you know. But if everyone with those feelings adopted your attitude, for a start, I wouldn't be living with you now, I'd still be. at home.

'Honestly! Reading hooks is supposed to improve the mind and foster a more sensible approach to life. But *your* wits seem more addled than ever! If that's what you really think, Aroma and I may as well go and live somewhere else. Then you can go ahead and invite all the others to move in and look after you.'

Bao-yu took both of them by the hand:

'I know you're right. But why must it happen so soon? Couldn't they wait till I am dust and ashes!'

Aroma put her hand over his mouth:

'There you go! More nonsense! You've only just begun to recover, and Mrs Bao's getting her appetite back again at last. If you make another scene I shall wash my hands of you altogether!'

Bao-yu knew that they were talking sense. But in his heart he couldn't find a way to their sensible point of view. 'What you are saying is obviously right,' he moaned. 'But what can I do? I feel so utterly wretched.'

Bao-chai said nothing more but secretly despatched Aroma to fetch him a sedative. They did their best to calm him down, and Aroma suggested to Bao-chai that they should ask Tan-chun to refrain from calling on Bao-yu before her departure.

'There's no need to worry,' said Bao-chai. 'In a day or two, when he's in a more reasonable frame of mind, it would actually be a good thing for them to have a long talk. Tan is an extremely intelligent person, and not the type to pander to the sensibilities of others. I'm sure she'll give him some sound advice, and help to cure him from thinking in this way.'

Meanwhile Faithful arrived with a message from Grandmother Jia who had just learned of Bao-yu's relapse. Aroma was to comfort him and on no account to allow him to fret. Aroma assured Faithful that she would follow Grandmother Jia's instructions, and after sitting with them for a short while Faithful returned.

Grandmother Jia was also concerned about the preparations for Tan-chun's departure. Although Tan-chun would not be travelling with a complete trousseau, they should nevertheless provide her with all the personal effects she might need. Grandmother Jia sent for Xi-feng, told her of Jia

Zheng's decision and placed these arrangements in her hands. Xi-feng undertook this responsibility, but to learn how she managed you must turn to the next chapter.

CHAPTER 101

In Prospect Garden a moonlit apparition
repeats an andent warning
And at Scattered Flowers Convent
the fortune-sticks provide a strange omen

Xi-feng returned to her apartment and, seeing that Jia Lian had not yet come home, began supervising the preparation of Tan-chun's baggage and trousseau.

Later that evening, as dusk was giving way to night, she suddenly conceived the idea of going to visit Tan-chun. She told Felicity and a couple of other maids to accompany her, and sent one of them on ahead with a lantern. As they walked out, a brilliant moon had already risen, and Xi-feng told the maid carrying the lantern that she would not be needed and could go home. Then, as they passed the window of the tea-room frequented by the domestics, she heard the sound of chattering coming from within. An animated discussion of some sort seemed to be in progress, punctuated by an occasional sob or burst of laughter. It must be some of the older serving-women gathered for a gossip, thought Xi-feng; curious, and not a little apprehensive, she told **Crimson** to go in and mingle with them.

'Listen carefully,' she said. 'Lead them on, and find out what it is they're talking about.'

'Yes, ma'am,' said Crimson, and went on her errand.

Xi-feng continued towards the Garden, accompanied now only by Felicity. The gate had been left ajar and mistress and maid were able to push it lightly open and walk in. Within the Garden the moonlight seemed even brighter, and the trees cast deep pools of shadow. The intense silence created an atmosphere of extreme solitude and desolation. They were about to take the path to Autumn Studio when a gust of wind blew through the trees, releasing a shower of falling leaves and soughing through the branches with a doleful sound that startled the crows and other nesting birds into flight. Xi4eng had drunk a little wine earlier in the evening, and the wind, when it blew upon her, set her trembling.

'How cold it is!' said Felicity from behind, huddling up to try to keep warm. The cold was even too much for Xi-feng.

'You'd better go home straight away and fetch me my erminelined sleeveless jacket. I shall wait for you at Miss Tan's.'

Felicity was glad of a chance to put on some warmer clothes herself, and needed no second bidding.

'Yes, ma'am,' she replied, turning about at once and heading for home at a run.

Xi-feng had not walked much further when she thought she heard something behind her, a strange sound, like that of an animal snuffling. Her hair stood on end, and looking back she caught sight of something black and shiny, a nose, pointed, sniffing in her direction, and two eyes that glowed like lanterns. She was beside herself with terror and gave a cry of alarm, only to see the creature -

for it was now recognizable as some sort of large dog - pad away from her, trailing a bushy tail. It went bounding up to the top of a mound of earth, stood stock-still, and then turned back towards her, raising its front paws in the air in a grotesque salutation.

Xi-feng - now in a state of abject panic and shaking hysterically -hurried on as fast as she could towards Autunm Studio. She had almost reached her destination and was turning past a large rock when she caught a fleeting glimpse of a figure in the shadows ahead of her. After a moment's hesitation she guessed it to be a maid from one of the apartments in the Garden, and called out:

'Who's there?'

Xi-feng repeated the question, but no one came forward. She was already beginning to feel quite faint, and in her confusion she thought she heard a voice behind her murmuring:

'Auntie, don't you even recognize me?'

She spun round and saw the figure of a lady standing there before her. There was something strangely familiar about her, the beauty of her features, the elegance of her attire; and yet somehow Xi-feng could not think for the moment whose young wife it could be.

'Auntie,' the lady continued, 'I see that the enjoyment of splendour and wealth is still your only concern, and that my warning to you years ago, to "plan for the hard times to come", has gone completely unheeded.'

Xi-feng lowered her head to try to think for a moment, but still could recall neither the person's identity, nor the occasion to which she was referring. The lady gave a rueful laugh.

'How you loved me once! Has all memory of me been utterly erased from your mind?'

Suddenly Xi-feng knew. It was Jia Rong's first wife, Qin Ke-qing,

'Aiyo!' she cried. 'But you died long ago! What are you doing here?'

She spat at the ghost and fled. But as she did so she tripped on a stone, and the shock of the fall gave her senses a jolt, as if waking them from a dream. Although her whole body had broken out in a sweat and she was still shivering with fright, she now felt alert and clear-headed and could distinguish the forms of **Crimson** and Felicity walking in her direction. Anxious lest her disarray provoke unfavourable comment, she hurriedly raised herself from the ground.

'What have you two been doing?' she scolded them. 'You've been an age. Hurry up and bring me my jacket.'

Felicity came forward and helped her into the jacket, while **Crimson** supported her, ready to walk on to Autumn Studio.

'I've already been there,' said Xi-feng untruthfully. 'They are all asleep. Let's go home now.'

She set off in great haste with the two maids. She arrived to find Jia Lian already at home, and could tell from the expression on his face that he was in a worse humour than usual. Although she wanted to ask what the matter was, she reflected that she would only be scolded for her pains, and so went straight to bed.

Next morning Jia Lian rose at dawn, intending to pay an early call on Qiu Shi-an, Eunuch Superintendent of the Inner Palace, to seek his help in connection with some personal matter. He had a little time to spare before setting off; and began glancing through the copies of the *Gazette* that had been delivered the day before and were lying on his table. The first item he happened to read was a routine report from the Board of Civil Office, in which the Board requested an expedited appointment to the vacant position of Senior Secretary, and received imperial authorization to proceed according to precedent. The next report was from the Board of Punishments, and communicated a memorial from the Governor of Yunnan Province, Wang

Zhong, concerning the arrest of a gang engaged in smuggling firearms and gunpowder. There were eighteen members of the gang in all, the ringleader being one Bao Yin, a domestic in the employment of Grand Preceptor Jia Hua, Duke of Zhen-guo. Jia Lian paused and appeared to be turning this last item of news over in his mind for a moment. Then he read on to the next item, an impeachment brought by Li Xiao, the magistrate of Soochow. The charge in this case was that a certain mandarin had indulged his household servants and allowed them to abuse their position in the maltreatment of soldiers and civilians. It referred in particular to the attempted rape and subsequent murder of an innocent married woman, and two other members of her family, committed by one Shi Fu, who claimed to be a servant in the household of Jia Fan, hereditary noble of the third degree.

Jia Lian seemed especially troubled by this last report. He would have liked to read the sequel, but was anxious not to miss his appointment with the eunuch. Changing into formal attire and dispensing with breakfast (though he did find time to take a couple of sips of the tea that Patience had just brought him), he left the house, mounted his horse and set off.

Patience put away his clothes and went in to wait on Xi-feng, who was still in bed.

'I heard you tossing and turning last night, ma'am. You can hardly have slept a wink. Why don't I give you a rub, and then maybe you'll be able to have a little nap?'

Xi-feng made no reply, and Patience, interpreting this as consent, climbed up onto the kang, sat down next to her and started to administer a gentle massage. Xi-feng was on the point of falling asleep when she heard Qiao-jie crying in the next room and opened her eyes again. Patience called out:

'Nannie Li, what are you doing? Qiao-jie's crying. Go and pat her on the back, you lazy old so-and-so!'

Nannie Li was rudely awakened from her slumbers, and vented her ill humour on Qiao-jie by giving her a few hefty spanks, muttering to herself:

'Confound you, you wretched little brat! You've not long to live anyway so just shut up and go to sleep, instead of carrying on as if your mother was dead, bawling at this ungodly hour!'

She gnashed her teeth and gave the child a pinch for good measure. Qiao-jie began bawling again at once.

'For heaven's sake! Just listen to that!' exclaimed Xi-feng. 'She's torturing my little girl! You go and give her the thrashing of her life, the evil old strumpet! And bring Qiao-jie in here to me.'

'Don't be too cross, ma'am,' said Patience with a placatory smile. 'Nannie Li would never dream of doing Qiao-jie any harm. It must have been an accident. If we beat her, there will be no end to the gossip. I can just hear it: "Beating the servants before the day's even dawned!"'

After a long silence, Xi-feng heaved a deep sigh:

'See what they get up to while I'm still alive and kicking! When I die - which won't be long now - I dread to think what will become of my poor Qiao-jie!'

'How can you speak like that, ma'am?' said Patience, trying to smile again. 'Don't start the day off on such a gloomy note!'

Xi-feng smiled bitterly:

'What makes you so optimistic? I won't last much longer. I've known it for some time. When I look back over my twenty-five years, I really can't complain. I've seen things and tasted things most people have never so much as set eyes on. I've had more than my share of comfort and luxury. I've been able to indulge my every whim, no one's ever managed to get the better of me in

anything. If J am fated to die young, why, that's something I shall simply have to accept.'
Tears were welling in Patience's eyes. Xi-feng laughed:
'Don't pretend to feel sorry for me! You'll be only too pleased to have me dead and out of the way. Then you'll all be able to lead happy and peaceful lives, rid of this "thorn in your flesh". There is only one thing I beg of you: whatever else happens, don't forget my little girl!'
Patience was by now in floods of tears. Xi-feng laughed again:
'Pull yourself together, for heaven's sake! I'm not going to die for a little while yet. It's too soon to start crying. Unless you want to send me to my grave before time?'
Patience dried her tears:
'I just found what you were saying so upsetting, ma'am.'
She carried on rubbing her back, and eventually Xi-feng dozed off.
Patience had no sooner climbed down from the kang than she heard footsteps outside. It was Jia Lian. He had ended up late for his appointment, and by the time he arrived Eunuch Qiu had already left for court. So he had been obliged to return home without having achieved anything, and was clearly in the blackest of moods. His first words when he saw Patience were:
'Aren't the others up yet?'
'No, sir.'
He flung aside the *portiere* and walked into the inner room, exclaiming sarcastically:
'Marvellous! Still in bed at this hour! Feet up and twiddling their thumbs at a time of family crisis!'
He called impatiently for tea and Patience hastened to pour him a cup. Earlier that morning, after Jia Lian's departure, the maids and serving-women had all gone back to sleep, and as none of them had expected him back so early the household was still in a state of complete disorder. There was no fresh tea, and the best Patience could produce was a cup of cold tea warmed up. When Jia Lian discovered this, he was furious and hurled his cup to the ground. The sound of smashing china woke Xi-feng again, and she sat up in a cold sweat, crying out in alarm and staring wide-eyed around her. She saw her husband sitting beside the kang in a fuming rage, and Patience stooping to retrieve the fragments of broken cup.
'Why are you back so soon?' she asked. After a long interval in which no answer was forthcoming, she repeated the question, and finally he shouted at her:
'Would you rather I hadn't come back at all? Do you wish I'd dropped down dead somewhere?'
'That's a little unnecessary, isn't it?' said Xi-feng, smiling uneasily. 'I just wondered why you were back so early today, that's all. It's nothing to lose your temper about.'
'I failed to see the man again, so there was nothing to be gained by *not* coming home.' His voice was still raised.
'In that case,' said Xi-feng, still attempting a wan smile, 'you'll just have to be patient and wait till tomorrow. Go a bit earlier next time, and you'll be sure to see him.'
'Here I am,' shouted Jia Lian, 'up to my eyes in work of my own, with no one to lend me a hand, and I have to waste my time like this chasing another man's game! I've been tearing around days on end, and heaven alone knows why, when the person really involved is sitting at home and having a good time! He doesn't seem the least bit bothered. On the contrary, he's even had the nerve to throw a birthday party, with plays and all sorts of fun and games - while Fm still running around in circles trying to sort out his mess!'
He spat on the ground, and then proceeded to give Patience a thorough ticking-off for good

measure. Xi-feng was choking with indignation. Her first impulse was to argue it out with him. But after a moment's reflection she thought it advisable to contain herself and still struggled to keep a smile on her face:

'But why work yourself up into such a rage about it? And why come ranting at me at this hour of the day? Did I ever say you had to do anyone this favour? If you've promised to, then be patient and go through with it for their sake. Anyway, it's inconceivable that someone in serious trouble could feel in the mood for parties and plays.'

Jia Lian: 'Precisely! Perhaps you'd like to go and ask him about it yourself tomorrow!'

Xi-feng (surprised): 'Ask whom?'

Jia Lian: 'Your brother.'

Xi-feng: *'Him?'*

Jia Lian: 'Of course! Who else?'

Xi-feng (concerned): 'But why does *he* need your help?'

Jia Lian: 'You're so well informed, you might as well be stuck at the bottom of a pickle-jar!'

Xi-feng: 'But I had no idea he was in any kind of trouble! How extraordinary!'

Jia Lian: 'Of course you didn't. Even Aunt Wang and Aunt Xue don't know about it. I didn't want to worry them. And you're always telling me how ill you are, so I decided to try to keep the whole thing from you as well. The very mention of it is enough to put me in a rage. Even today I wouldn't have told you, if you hadn't pressed me. No doubt you think that brother of yours is a marvellous fellow! But do you know what people call him?'

Xi-feng: 'What?'

Jia Lian: *'Wang Ren.'*

Xi-feng let out a puzzled little laugh.

'Well, that's his name, isn't it?'

Jia Lian: 'That's what *you* think. It's not *that* "Wang Ren"; it's the one meaning "Blind to all forms of human decency"!'

Xi-feng: 'Why, that's an insult! Who'd ever say such a thing?'

Jia Lian: 'It's no less than he deserves! I may as well tell you the truth, so that you can see for yourself what sort of a brother you really have. What about this birthday party he's giving for Uncle Zisheng?'

Xi-feng thought for a moment, then exclaimed:

'Aiyo! Why yes, now that you mention it, that's something I meant to ask you about: surely Uncle Zi-sheng's birthday falls during the winter? Bao-yu used to go every year. How strange! I remember quite clearly. When Uncle Zheng was promoted and Uncle Zi-sheng sent those players over, I made a mental note to myself. It seemed so out of character for him to do a thing like that. Uncle Zi-sheng has always been the mean one, not at all like Uncle Zi-teng. In fact the two brothers were always at daggers drawn. You only have to look at the casual way Uncle Zi-sheng behaved when Uncle Zi-teng died. You'd never have thought they were even related.

'I remember saying that when his next birthday came round we should be sure to send him some players as a return gesture, so as not to be beholden to him. But surely it's much too early in the year for him to be celebrating his birthday now? What's going on?'

Jia Lian: 'You still haven't got the faintest idea, have you? The very first thing your precious brother Ren did when he got back to the capital was to profit from Uncle Zi-teng's death by holding a memorial service. He was afraid we'd try to put a stop to it so he never told us. The

funeral donations brought him in several thousand taels, I can tell you. Uncle Zi-sheng was furious with him afterwards for cornering the market. This put your brother in a bit of a spot. So for his next little project he picked Uncle Zi-sheng's birthday, the perfect opportunity to make some more money for himself, and placate old Zi-sheng into the bargain. He wasn't going to be held back by what the family or friends might say, or by the paltry fact that Uncle Zi-sheng.doesn't really have a birthday until next winter. Let people think what they like, he doesn't care! He doesn't know the meaning of the word "pride"!

'Now, on top of all this, let me tell you why I got up so early this morning. Recently there's been a memorial from the Censorate. It's in some way connected with the recent disturbances on the coast. The wording refers to "the deficit left by Wang Zi-teng after his term of office" and asks that this deficit be "made good by his younger brother Wang Zi-sheng and by his nephew Wang Ren". The two of them got the wind up and asked me to try to pull a few strings for them. I agreed to do it for them. They seemed so pathetic and scared, and anyway I was afraid it might eventually affect you and Aunt Wang. I hoped old Qiu in the Inner Palace might see to it for me, perhaps get Uncle Zi-teng's successor to cook the books somehow. But I was late, damn it, he'd already left for court. So there I was, up at dawn, tearing around for nothing, while *they* put on plays and hold a party! If that isn't enough to make a man's blood boil, tell me what is!'

Xi-feng still felt she must put some sort of a case for her brother, partly out of her constitutional need never to admit defeat, and partly out of loyalty to her own family:

'However badly he may have behaved, he's still your brother4n-law. If you help him, you'll be doing a good turn for both of my uncles, for the living and the dead. Our family honour is at stake; so I implore you to help. Otherwise you know what will happen: I shall be held responsible for your wrath, and they'll blacken my name for ever.'

Xi-feng burst into tears. Sitting up in bed, she began to comb her hair, and to throw on some clothes.

'There's no need for you to react like that,' said Jia Lian. 'It's your brother who's behaved so abominably; I've said nothing against you. And the servants-- when I had to go out this morning, I knew you were not well, so I didn't disturb you. But they just went on sleeping. Our parents never tolerated such behaviour. You've grown too slack. You want to please everybody, that's your trouble. And the moment I say anything critical, you start hauling yourself out of bed in protest. If I give the servants a piece of my mind, I suppose you'll stick up for them next. It's too absurd!'

Xi-feng dried her eyes.

'It's late,' she said. 'I ought to be getting up anyway.' After a pause, she continued: 'Even if that's how you feel, please try to do what you can for my family, for my sake. And you know how grateful Aunt Wang will be.'

'All right, all right,' grumbled Jia Lian. 'Stop teaching your grandmother to suck eggs.'

'Why are you getting up, ma'am?' put in Patience. 'It's too early yet. And I don't see what *you* have to work yourself into such a terrible temper for, sir! Why take it all out on us? Hasn't Mrs Lian gone to enough trouble for you in the past? The number of times she's borne the brunt on your behalf! Perhaps I shouldn't say this, but in view of all that she's done for you, it doesn't seem very fair to make such a big fuss about this one favour, especially when you think how many other people are involved. Do you have no consideration for her feelings? Why should she take all the blame anyway? We were late getting up, and you're entitled to be angry with us -we're only servants after all. But when you think how she has worked herself into the ground and ruined her

health, it seems so unkind of you to pick a quarrel with her now!'

Patience's eyes filled with tears. Jia Lian's original ill humour, strong though it had undoubtedly been, could not withstand the combined opposition of both his womenfolk - at once so appealing and so sharp-tongued.

'All right, forget it,' he said, with a bitter smile. 'She's hard enough to cope with on her own, without you leaping to her defence. I know I'm just an outsider here anyway, and you're both itching to have me dead and out of the way.'

'Don't speak like that,' said Xi-feng. 'Who knows what will happen to any of us? Very probably I shall die before you. The sooner I do, the sooner my heart will be at rest.'

She began to weep again, and Patience tried to comfort her. It was now broad daylight, and the sun was shining in at the window. Jia Lian, who saw little prospect of steering the conversation out of this impasse, took his leave.

Xi-feng was about to finish her toilet when one of Lady Wang's junior maids came in:

'Her Ladyship says, will you be visiting your uncle today, ma'am, and if so would you take Mrs Bao with you?'

Xi-feng had found the recent scene thoroughly depressing. It was deeply mortifying that her own family should let her down so badly, on top of which she was still suffering from the shock of her encounter in the Garden the previous evening, and felt in no mood for an excursion.

'Tell Her Ladyship that I still have one or two things to see to, and won't be able to go today. Anyway the party they're holding is not what I would call a genuine occasion. If Mrs Bao wants to go, she can go on her own.'

'Yes, ma'am.'

The maid returned with this message to Lady Wang's apartment. When she had completed her toilet and dressed herself, Xi-feng reflected that even if she didn't attend the party, she ought at least to send a note. Besides, Bao-chai had not been married long, and would probably feel rather nervous about going by herself. She decided she should visit her, if only to offer moral support, and after a brief call on Lady Wang she excused herself on some pretext and made her way to Bao-yu's apartment. He was reclining fully dressed on the kang, staring in a trance-like manner at Bao-chai, who was busy combing her hair. Xi-feng stood in the doorway for a while watching them. Bao-chai presently turned round and seeing her standing there promptly rose to her feet and asked her to be seated. Bao-yu also climbed down from the kang, as Xi-feng seated herself, with a playful smile on her face. Bao-chai scolded Musk:

'Why didn't you say that Mrs Lian was here?' Musk laughed:

'When Mrs Lian came in, she gave us a sign to be silent.'

Xi-feng turned to Bao-yu:

'Well, what are you waiting for? Off you go! Honestly, I've never set eyes on such a great big baby. A lady wants to do her toilet in private, and you have to climb up beside her and sit there staring! Heavens above, you're man and wife now, you've all day to gawp at her. And what about the maids? Don't you care if they make fun of you?'

Xi-feng giggled and eyed Bao-yu, clicking her tongue in mock-disapproval. Her words seemed to have little effect on him other than making him feel rather uncomfortable. Bao-chai, however, blushed a fierce crimson, ashamed at having to listen but too embarrassed to reply. Aroma came in with some tea and Bao-chai endeavoured to conceal her embarrassment by offering xi-feng a pipe of tobacco. Xi-feng rose to her feet and smilingly accepted.

‘Cousin Chai, take no notice of us. Hadn’t you better hurry and get dressed?’
Bao-yu meanwhile had begun shambling around, searching for something one moment, fiddling with something else the next.
‘Off with you then!’ said Xi-feng. ‘Who ever heard of a husband waiting for his wife to go out?’
‘These clothes aren’t right,’ said Bao-yu. ‘That peacock cape Grannie gave me to wear last time I went to Uncle Zi-sheng’s was so much nicer.’
‘Well, go ahead and wear it this time then,’ said Xi-feng teasingly.
‘How can I? It’s too early in the year.
Xi-feng realized that she had inadvertently drawn attention to the incorrect ‘timing’ (and therefore fraudulent nature) of her uncle’s party. It didn’t matter so much about Bao-chai, who was herself related to the Wangs. But she felt embarrassed to have thus risked discrediting her own family in front of the maids. Aroma, whose mind was running along very different lines, hastened to add her explanation of Bao-yu’s words:
‘I don’t think you understand, ma’am. He wouldn’t wear that cape even if it were the right season.’
‘Why ever not?’ asked Xi-feng.
‘I should explain, ma’am,’ replied Aroma. ‘Mr Bao’s ways are sometimes so very strange. Her Old Ladyship gave him the cape to wear to his uncle Wang’s party two years ago. He had an accident and burnt a hole in it. My mother was seriously ill at the time and I was at home looking after her. Skybright was still with us then, though she was already ill, and I was told when I got back that she had stayed up all night darning the cape for him. The mend was so neat that Her Old Ladyship didn’t even notice it the next day. One day last year, when it was particularly cold, I told Tealeaf to take the cape to school in case Bao-yu needed something warmer to put on. But the sight of it reminded Bao-yu of Skybright and he said he never wanted to wear it again. He told me to put it away for good.’
‘Poor Skybright!’ put in Xi-feng before Aroma had finished speaking. ‘Such a pretty girl! And so clever with her hands! If only she hadn’t been quite so quick-tongued. Someone must have gone gossiping to Lady Wang, or she would never have dealt with the poor girl so harshly and driven her to such an early death.
‘Which reminds me. Not so very long ago I saw Cook Liu’s daughter - Fivey I think her name is - and couldn’t help noticing that she’s the spitting image of Skybright. I thought of bringing her in to work for me, and her mother seemed agreeable to the idea. Then I thought what a good replacement she’d make for **Crimson** in Bao-yu’s apartment. But Patience told me it was Lady Wang’s policy not to take on any more pretty maids like Skybright for Bao-yu. So I dropped the idea. Now that he’s married I’m sure there can be no objection. I’ll tell Fivey to start work here straight away. How would that be, Bao? Then if you ever find yourself missing Skybright, all you need to do is look at Fivey instead.’
Bao-yu had been about to leave the room, but at Xi-feng’s mention of Fivey had stood there bemused. Aroma spoke for him:

‘Of course he’d be pleased. He’s wanted her as a maid for a long while, but knew that Her Ladyship was against the idea.’

‘Very well then, I’ll tell her to come tomorrow,’ said Xi-feng. ‘And I’ll square your mother mysel£’

Bao-yu’s delight knew no bounds and he set off in high spirits for

Grandmother Jia's apartment, leaving Bao-chai to finish her toilet.

Xi-feng had found the contrast between the way in which Bao-yu and Bao-chai clung to each other, and her own recent conflict with Jia Lian, somewhat depressing, and she was now anxious to leave. She rose and said to Bao-chai with a smile:

'Shall we go and see Aunt Wang now?'

Still smiling she walked out of the room, and Bao-chai accompanied her. They went first to Grandmother Jia's apartment, where they found Bao-yu informing the old lady of the proposed expedition to Uncle Wang Zi-sheng's. Grandmother Jia nodded:

'Off you go then. But don't drink too much, and be sure to come home early. Don't forget you're only just beginning to get well again.'

'Yes, Grannie,' said Bao-yu.

He had no sooner reached the courtyard than he turned round and re-entered the room, walking over to Bao-chai and whispering something in her ear. She smiled:

'Yes of course. Now be off with you!'

She hurried him on his way once more.

Grandmother Jia, Xi-feng and Bao-chai settled down to a conversation, but had barely exchanged three sentences when Ripple appeared:

'The Young Master has sent Tealeaf back with a message for Mrs Bao.'

Bao-chai: 'What's he forgotten now?'

Ripple: 'I told one of the junior maids to ask Tealeaf. The message is this: "The Young Master forgot to tell Mrs Bao something. She should not be too long if she *is* coming; and if she *isn't*, then she should take care not to stand in a draught".'

Grandmother Jia, Xi-feng and the entire assembly of old serving-women and maidservants burst out laughing. Bao-chai blushed fiercely and said to Ripple with a scornful 'pfui':

'Silly creature! Is *that* worth running back in such a fluster for?' Ripple giggled and sent a junior maid to scold Tealeaf, who raced back to Bao-yu, calling to the maid over his shoulder:

'The Young Master insisted on my dismounting to go on this fool's errand. If I *hadn't* delivered his message I'd have been in trouble with him, and now that I *have* I get it in the neck from *them!*'

The maid laughed and went running back to repeat this to the ladies. Grandmother Jia turned to Bao-chai:

'You'd better go, my dear, or he'll never stop fretting.'

What with this and Xi-feng's merciless teasing, Bao-chai felt too embarrassed to stay any longer.

*

When Bao-chai had taken her leave, Perfecta, one of the nuns from the Convent of the Scattered Flowers, came to call on Grandmother Jia. She greeted Xi-feng also, and sat down to take tea.

'Why haven't you been to see us for such a long while?' asked Grandmother Jia.

'These past few days we have had so many services at the Convent,' replied Perfecta, 'and so many grand ladies coming to make their devotions; I just haven't had a moment to call my own.

Today I have a special reason for visiting Your Old Ladyship. We have a private service tomorrow which I thought you might possibly be interested in attending.'

'What kind of service is it?' asked Grandmother Jia.

'Last month,' replied Perfecta, 'the household of the late Excellency Wang was afflicted with a possession of spirits. Her Ladyship even saw her husband's departed spirit during the night. She came to tell me about it yesterday at the Convent, and pledged herself to an act of devotion at the shrine of our Bodhisattva of the Scattered Flowers. It's to be a forty-nine-day Solemn Mass for Purification of All Souls on Land and Sea, for the Preservation and Peace of All Members of the Family, for the Ascension into the Celestial Regions of All Departed Souls, and for the Well-Being in This Life of All the Living. I've been extremely busy with the preparations, and this is the first opportunity I've had to come and pay my respects.'

Xi-feng had always scorned all forms of superstition. But her encounter with Qin Ke-qing's spirit the night before had begun to undermine her Scepticism, and Perfecta's words now struck a new chord in her. She could almost feel herself being converted to a belief in the efficacy of such rituals.

'Who is this Bodnisattva of the Scattered Flowers?' she asked the nun. 'How is it that he has the power to avert misfortune and keep evil spirits at bay?'

Perfecta could sense that a seed had been sown.

'Since you have asked, dear lady,' she replied, 'allow me to tell you a little about this Saint of ours. His story is an ancient and well-attested one, full of miraculous events. Born in the Land of Giant Trees in the Western Paradise, of humble parents who hewed wood for a living, the Bodhisattva came into the world with three horns on his head and four eyes in his forehead. He was three feet tall at birth, with arms so long that his hands reached the ground. His parents thought him to be the incarnation of some monstrous spirit, and abandoned him on an icy mountainside. But, unbeknown to them, this mountain was the haunt of a magic monkey, who used to come there hunting for food. On one of his excursions he discovered the child and noticed that from the tip of his head there emanated a white aura that streamed up towards Heaven, causing tigers and wolves to keep their distance.

'The monkey realized that this was someone very special indeed, and he carried the Bodhisattva-child home to his cave and reared him. The boy, so the monkey soon discovered, was endowed with prodigious innate powers of Perception, and with an intuitive ability to expound the Mysteries of Zen. He would engage the monkey in daily philosophical discussions and the two of them would practise meditation together. So wonderful were his words that at the sound of them the sky would be filled with an abundance of scattered flowers. After a thousand years had passed, he ascended into Heaven. The spot where he expounded the sutras, the Precinct of the Scattered Flowers, as it is called, can be seen on the hillside to this very day. Every prayer uttered there has proved efficacious. Many a miracle has been performed, many a soul delivered from its afflictions. In due time men built a temple there, and fashioned a statue of the Saint, before which they make offerings.'

'But what proof is there that any of this is true?' asked Xi-feng.

'Still sceptical, ma'am? What proof of that sort *can* there be, of a Living Buddha? But consider: if it were all a mere fabrication, it might have fooled one or two, but it could hardly have fooled the multitudes of intelligent men and women who have put their faith in him over the ages. The unbroken incense-offerings of believers, and the miracles wrought, testify to the enduring power

of our religion and serve continually to inspire our faith.'

Xi-feng was almost convinced.

'In that case I shall visit you tomorrow and test it for myself. Do you have fortune-sticks at the temple? I should like to consult them. If they give me a plausible answer to my question, I shall embrace your faith.'

'Our fortune-sticks are particularly efficacious, ma'am,' said Perfecta. 'Try them tomorrow and see for yourself.'

'Why not wait until the day after?' put in Grandmother Jia. 'That will be the first of the month. Better to try then.'

Perfecta drank her tea and went on to visit Lady Wang, before returning to her Convent.

Xi-feng managed to struggle through the rest of that day and the next, and early in the morning of the first of the month she had her carriage made ready, and set out for the Convent of the Scattered Flowers, accompanied by Patience and a bevy of serving-women. Perfecta and the other nuns welcomed her, ushered her in and offered her tea, and then after she had washed her hands they all proceeded to the main hall of worship to burn incense. Xi-feng would not look up at the statues, but otherwise conducted herself like a devout believer, kowtowing and taking the tube of fortune-sticks from the altar. She prayed in silence, describing her encounter with the spirit and her chronic state of ill health, then shook the tube three times. There was a 'whoosh!' and one of the bamboo sticks shot out of the tube. Xi-feng kowtowed again and picked it up. It bore the inscription: 'No.33. Supreme Good Fortune.' Perfecta promptly consulted the Divination Book and found under entry No.$_{33}$ the following line of verse, which she read aloud:

'Wang Xi-feng comes home to rest, in finery arrayed.'

Xi-feng was astounded to hear her own name, and asked the nun:

'Is there some historical person by the name of Wang Xi-feng?'

'Surely, ma'am,' replied Perfecta, 'a lady of your wide knowledge has encountered the story of Wang Xi-feng of the Later Han dynasty and what befell him on his way to the examination?'

Zhou Rui's wife was standing at Xi-feng's side and added with a smile:

'Why, that was the story the lady storyteller told at the Lantern Festival a couple of years ago. We asked her not to use your name as it was impolite.'

Of course,' said Xi-feng with a laugh. 'I forgot.'

She went on to read the rest of the text:

'When twenty years away from home have passed, In silks the wanderer returns at last.
The bee culls nectar from a hundred flowers;
Honey for some, but for himself a thankless task.
A traveller arrives.
News is delayed.
In litigation, success.
In matrimony, reconsideration.'

Xi-feng could not make much sense of it, and Perfecta hastened to expound:

‘My congratulations, ma’am! What an uncannily apt response on the part of the oracle! Since you have grown up here in the capital, you have never had a chance to visit your old home in Nanking. But now that Sir Zheng has received this provincial posting, he may well send for his family to join him and then, surely, you will “come home to rest, in finery arrayed”!’

As she spoke Perfecta copied down the text and gave it to one of the maids. Xi-feng was still only half-convinced by her interpretation. Perfecta set a vegetarian meal before her guest, but Xi-feng seemed loath to eat, and after a mouthful put down her chopsticks and rose to leave. She gave Perfecta a contribution ‘for incense’, and the nun, realizing that she could not persuade her to stay any longer, saw her out of the Convent.

When Xi-feng returned home, Grandmother Jia, Lady Wang and the others insisted on having a full report. She told one of the maids to recite the words of the divination, complete with the interpretation. The ladies were delighted:

‘Perhaps Sir Zheng *is* planning to send for us all! What a nice trip that would be!’

Any doubts Xi-feng still harboured about the favourable reading of the omen were dispelled by their unanimous acceptance of it.

*

Our story now turns to Bao-yu. On the day in question, after waking from his midday nap, he noticed that Bao-chai was out and was

beginning to wonder where she might be, when he saw her come back into the room.

'Where have you been?' he asked. 'You've been out a long time.'

'I've been looking at Cousin Feng's divination.'

Bao-yu was keen to hear the whole story. Bao-chai obliged; and when she had finished reciting the divination verse for him, she commented:

'Everyone else says it's a lucky omen, but personally I think there's more to the words than meets the eye. "Comes home to rest, in finery arrayed." Hm .. . We shall have to wait and see.'

'There you go, sceptical as ever,' quipped Bao-yu. 'Forever seeking strange meanings. It must be a lucky saying; anyone can tell that. You *would* have some pet theory of your own. So what doyou think it means?'

Bao-chai was about to elaborate, when a maid arrived to inform her that her presence was required at Lady Wang's. To learn the reason for this summons, please read the next chapter.

CHAPTER102

Illness descends upon the Jia family
in *Ning-guo House*
And charms and holy water are used
to exoricze Prospect Garden

Bao-chai went immediately to Lady Wang's apartment.

'As you know, Tan-chun is getting married,' began Lady Wang, when Bao-chai had paid her respects. 'You and Li Wan must have a word with her before she leaves, and try to cheer her up. She is your own cousin after all. She's such a sensible girl, and I know how well the two of you get along together. I understand that Bao-yu was most upset and started crying when he heard the news. You must talk him round too.

'I've been too poorly recently to be able to do much myself, and Feng spends half her days laid up in bed. You're a clever girl. From now on you're going to have to accept a greater share of the family responsibilities. Don't feel you must hold back all the time for fear of causing offence. In time the weight of this entire household will rest on your shoulders.'

'Yes, Mother.'

Lady Wang continued:

'There's another thing. Feng came here with Cook Liu's daughter yesterday and said she wanted her to fill the vacancy in your apartment.'

'Yes, Mother. Patience brought her over to start today,' said Bao-chai. 'She said that you and Cousin Feng were in agreement about it.'

'Yes. As a matter of fact it was Feng's idea. I decided it was not worth making an issue of it and going against her wishes. But I feel I should warn you all the same, the girl doesn't look altogether reliable to me. She could make trouble. A while ago I had one or two of Baoyu's more flirtatious maids dismissed - I'm sure you knew about the affair; it led to your going home to live with your mother. Now that you and Bao-yu are married, things are different of course. But I still feel I ought to mention it, so that you can keep an eye on her. Remember, Aroma is the only dependable maid in your apartment.'

'Yes, Mother.'

Bao-chai stayed a little longer and then left. After dinner she visited Tan-chun and talked with her at some length, offering what comfort and advice she could. We need not describe their conversation in any detail.

The next day was Tan-chun's day of departure and she came once more to bid a final farewell to Bao-yu. He found the parting a painful one, as was only to be expected. But when she spoke to him calmly and philosophically of her 'obligations in life', although at first he hung his head in silence, in the end he began to look a little more cheerful. Tan-chun was relieved that he seemed able to view her future in a less tragic and more enlightened manner; and after saying goodbye to the rest of the family, she climbed into her sedan and set off on the long journey that would take her by land and water to the South.

*

Prospect Garden, once home to such a distinguished little society of young ladies, had since the death of the Imperial Concubine been left to fall into gradual ruin. With Bao-yu's marriage, Dai-yu's death and the departure of Xiang-yun and Bao-qin, the number of residents was already sadly depleted. Then, when the cold weather set in, Li Wan, her cousins Li Qi and Li Wen, Xi-chun and Tan-chun had all moved out to their previous abodes and had only ever gathered together in the Garden to enjoy themselves on particularly fine days or moonlit nights. With Tan-chun no longer at home and Bao-yu still convalescing and confined indoors, there was scarcely anyone left to enjoy the Garden's delights. It became a desolate place, its paths frequented only by the handful of caretakers whom duty still obliged to live there.

On the day of Tan-chun's departure, You-shi had come across to Rong-guo House to see her off. It was getting late by the time she left for home, and she decided to save herself the trouble of taking a carriage by returning through the Garden, using the side gate that communicated with Ning-guo House. As she walked through the grounds she was forcibly struck by the aura of desolation that pervaded the place. The buildings were unchanged, but she noticed that a strip of land along the inside of the Garden wall had already been converted into some sort of vegetable plot. A deep sense of melancholy oppressed her spirit. When she reached home she immediately developed a fever, and though she fought it off for a couple of days eventually she had to retire to bed. During the daytime the fever was not unduly severe, but at night it became almost insupportable and she grew delirious and started babbling to herself. Cousin Zhen sent for a doctor at once, who pronounced that she had caught a chill, which had developed complications and had entered into the *yang-ming* stomach meridian. This accounted for her delirious babbling and hallucinations. She would recover once she had opened her bowels.

You-shi took two doses of the medicine the doctor prescribed, but showed no sign of improvement. If anything she became more deranged than before. Cousin Zhen was now seriously concerned and sent for Jia Rong:

'Get hold of the names of some good doctors in town and send for one immediately. We must have a second opinion.'

'But the doctor who came the other day is extremely well thought of;' objected Jia Rong. 'It seems to me that in Mother's case medicine is of little use.'

'How can you talk like that!' exclaimed Cousin Zhen. 'If we don't give her medicine, what are we supposed to do? Just let her fade away?'

'I didn't say she couldn't be cured,' said Jia Rong. 'What was going through my mind was this: when Mother went over to Rong-guo House the other day, she came back through the Garden. And the fever began as soon as she reached home. It could be that she encountered some evil spirit on the way and is now possessed. I happen to know of an excellent fortune-teller in town, by the name of Half-Immortal Mao. He hails from the South, and is something of a specialist in *The Book of Changes*. I think we should ask him for a consultation first. See if he can shed any light on the matter. If that gets us nowhere, then let's by all means look for another

doctor.'

Cousin Zhen agreed, and they sent for the fortune-teller at once. When he arrived, he and Jia Rong sat down together in the study and after drinking his tea Half-Immortal Mao began the consultation proper:

'On what matter does my esteemed client wish me to consult the *Changes?'*

'It concerns my mother,' said Jia Rong. 'She has fallen ill. Could you please seek some illumination from the *Changes* on her behalf?'

'Very well,' replied Mao. 'First I shall require some clean water with which to wash my hands. Then, will you be so good as to light some incense, and to set up a small altar? And I shall proceed with the divination.'

The servants carried out these instructions, and Mao extracted the divining cylinder from within his gown, approached the altar, and after making a profound reverence began shaking the cylinder, intoning the following prayer:

'In the name of the Supreme Ultimate, of the Yin and of the Yang, and of the Generative Powers of the Cosmos; in the name of the Holy Signs made manifest in the Great River, which embody the Myriad Transformations of the Universe, and of the Saints who in their wisdom leave no sincere request unheeded: here, in good faith, Mr Jia, on the occasion of his mother's illness, devoutly beseeches the Four Sages, Fu Xi, King Wen, the Duke of Zhou and Confucius, to look down from above and vouchsafe an efficacious response to this his earnest supplication. If evil lies hidden, then bring the evil to light; if good, then show the good. First we ask to be told the Three Lines of the Lower Trigram.'

He turned the cylinder upside down and the coins fell onto the tray.

'Ah! Most efficacious: for the Prime we have a Moving Yin.'

The second throw gave a Yang At Rest, the third another Moving Yin. Picking up the coins, Half-Immortal Mao said:

'The Lower Trigram has been communicated. Now let us ask to receive the Three Lines of the Upper Trigram, and thus complete the Hexagram.'

These fell as follows: Yang At Rest, Yin At Rest, Yang At Rest. Half-Immortal Mao replaced the cylinder and coins inside his gown, and sat down.

'Pray be seated,' he said. 'Let us consider this in greater detail. We have here the sixty-fourth Hexagram, "Before Completion": x-.

The Line of most significance to you and to your generation is the Tertian, with Fire at the Seventh Branch *Wu*, and the Signature"Ruin". This certainly indicates that Dire Misfortune lies in store. You have asked me to consult the *Changes* concerning your mother's illness, and great attention should therefore be paid to the parental Prime, which contains the Signature "Spectre", as does the Quintal. It would seem that your mother is indeed seriously afflicted. But all will still be for the best. The present misfortune is concatenated with Water at the First Branch *Zi* and at the Twelfth Branch *Hai;* but when this element wanes, with the Third Branch *Yin* comes Wood and thence Fire. The Signature "Offspring" at the Tertian also counteracts the Spectral influence, and with the regenerative effect of the continuing revolution of both the solar and lunar bodies, in two days the "Spectre" originally concatenated with Water at the First Branch *Zi* should be rendered void, and by the day *Xu* all will be well. But I see that the parental Prime contains further Spectral permutations. I fear your father may himself be afflicted. And your own personal Line has a severe concentration of "Ruin". When Water reaches its zenith and Earth its nadir, be prepared for misfortune to strike.'

Mao sat back, thrusting his beard forward, as if to emphasize the authenticity of his prognosis.

At the beginning of this rigmarole it was all Jia Rong could do to keep a straight face. But gradually Mao impressed him as a man who knew what he was talking about, and when he went on to predict misfortune for Cousin Zhen, Jia Rong began to take him rather more seriously.

'Your exposition is certainly very learned,' he commented. 'But could you, I wonder, be more precise as to the

nature of the illness that is affilicting my mother?'
'In the Hexagram,' replied Mao, 'Fire at the Seventh Branch *Wu* in the Prime changes to Water and is thus controlled. This would indicate some inner congestion in which both cold and heat are combined. But I am afraid a precise diagnosis lies beyond the limitations of even a more elaborate milfoil reading of the *Changes*. For that, you would have to cast a Six Cardinal horoscope.'
'Is that branch of divination one with which you are also conversant?' asked Jia Rong.
'To a certain extent,' replied Mao.
Jia Rong asked him to cast the horoscope, and wrote down the relevant Stems and Branches. Mao proceeded to adjust his Diviner's Compass, setting the co-ordinates for the Heavenly Generals. The reading obtained was: 'White Tiger' at the Eleventh Branch *Xu*.
'This Configuration,' said Mao, 'is known as "Dissolution of the

enter the Garden only accompanied and armed with cudgels.
After a few days, Cousin Zhen fell ill as predicted. He did not send for a doctor. Whenever the illness permitted, he went to the Garden to pray and burn paper money; whenever it became severe, he uttered feverish prayers in his chamber. He recovered, and then it was Jia Rong's turn to go down; and after Jia Rong, the others, one by one. This continued for several months, and both households lived in constant fear. Even the slightest rustle or cry of a bird was suspect, and every plant or tree was feared to harbour a malicious spirit. Now that the Garden was abandoned and no longer productive, extra funds were needed again for the various apartments of the household, and this added to the already crushing deficit of Rong-guo House. The Garden's caretakers saw nothing to be gained by staying. They all wanted to leave the place, and invented a whole series of incidents to substantiate the presence of diabolical tree-imps and flower sprites. Eventually they achieved their goal: they were all evacuated, the garden gate was securely locked, and no one dared go in at all. Fine halls, lofty pavilions, elegant rooms and terraces became nothing more than nesting-places for birds and lairs for wild beasts.

*

Skybright's cousin, Wu Gui, lived, it will be remembered, opposite the rear gate-house of the Garden. It had reached the ears of Wu Gui's wife that Skybright, after her death, had become a flower fairy, and from then on she took the precaution of staying indoors every evening. One day Wu Gui went shopping and stayed out later than usual. His wife had caught a slight cold and during the day took the wrong medicine, with the result that when Wu Gui returned that evening he found her lying dead on the kang. Because of her reputation for promiscuity, other members of the household staff concluded that a sprite must have climbed over the Garden wall, enjoyed her at inordinate length, and finally 'sucked the sap' out of her.
This incident put Grandmother Jia in a great tizzy. She increased the guard around Bao-yu's apartment and had it constantly watched and patrolled. Some of the younger maids subsequently claimed to have seen weird red-faced creatures lurking in the vicinity, while others testified to the presence of a strange female apparition of great beauty. Such rumours soon multiplied, and Bao-yu lived in mortal terror. Bao~chai was less easily taken in, and warned the maids that any more fear-mongering would bring them a good hiding. Although this quietened things down a bit, there was still an atmosphere of great apprehension throughout both mansions, and more watchmen were taken on, which was an additional expense.
Jia She was the only one not to believe a word of it.
'There's nothing the matter with the Garden, for heaven's sake! Haunted! What an absurd notion!'

He waited for a warm day when there was a mild breeze, and went to inspect the Garden himself; accompanied by a large number of armed servants. They all advised him against going, but he would not listen. When they entered the Garden, the atmosphere was so dark and sinister, so oppressively Yin, that they could almost touch it. Jia She refused to turn back, and his servants reluctantly followed him in, with many a furtive and shrinking sideways glance. One young lad among them, already scared to death, heard a sudden 'whoosh!', and turning to look saw something brightly coloured go flashing past. He uttered a terrified *'Aiyo!'*, went instantly weak at the knees and collapsed on the ground. When Jia She looked back and stopped to question him, he replied breathlessly:

'I saw it with my own eyes! I did! A monster with a **yellow** face and a **red** beard, all dressed in **green**! It went up there, into that grotto behind those trees!'

Jia She was somewhat shaken himself.

'Did anyone else see this thing?'

Some of the servants decided to take advantage of the situation and replied:

'Clear as daylight, sir. You were up in front and we didn't want to alarm you, sir. So we tried to keep a grip on ourselves, and act as if nothing had happened.'

Jia She now lacked the courage to go any further. He turned back and went home as quickly as possible, telling the boys who had accompanied him not to say anything about what had happened, but merely to let it be known that they had had an uneventful tour of the Garden. He himself needed no further convincing that the Garden was haunted, and began to think it might be advisable to apply to the Taoist Pontificate for priests to perform an exorcism. His servants, meanwhile, who were by nature fond of making trouble, saw how frightened their master was, and far from concealing the episode, retailed it with a great deal of gusto and embellishment, creating quite a sensation and eliciting a good deal of open-mouthed astonishment.

In the end Jia She decided that there was no other recourse than to go ahead and hold a formal ceremony of exorcism. A suitable day in the almanac was chosen, and an altar was constructed in the Garden, on a dais in the main hall of the Reunion Palace. Images of the Three Pure Ones were set up, flanked by figures of the spirits presiding over each of the Twenty-Eight Constellations, and of the Four Great Commanders - Ma, Zhao, Wen and Zhou. Further down the hall, the sacred precinct was made complete with a diagrammatic representation of the Thirty-Six Heavenly Generals. The air was heavy with flowers and incense, the hall blazed with lanterns and candles. Bells, drums, liturgical instruments and other paraphernalia were arrayed along both sides of the hall, and emblematic banners were hoisted at each of the Five Cardinal Points (the Four Corners and the Centre). The Taoist Pontiff had delegated Forty-Nine Deacons for the ceremony, and they began by spending a whole day purifying the altar. Then three priests went the rounds of the hall, waving smoking bundles of joss-sticks and sprinkling holy water, and when this was done the great Drum of the Dharma thundered forth. The priests now donned their Seven Star Mitres and robed themselves in their chasubles emblazoned with the Nine Heavenly Mansions and the Eight Trigrams. Wearing Cloud-Mounting Pattens on their feet and holding ivory tablets in their hands, they addressed themselves in reverent supplication to the sages. For a full day they chanted the *Arcanum Primordii*, a text renowned for its efficacy in the dispelling of misfortune, the exorcizing of evil spirits and the general enhancement of propitious vibrations. Then they produced the Spirit Roll, which called on the Heavenly Generals to be present. It was inscribed with the following large characters:

A SUMMONS

IN THE NAME

OF THE

THREE REALMS,

THE ULTIMATE, THE PRIMORDIAL, AND THE PURE;

IN THE NAME

OF THE

SUPREME PONTIFF
CHAPTER 102

AND THE

TALISMANIC POWER VESTED IN HIM;

ALL ISENEVOLENT SPIRITS OF THE REGION

ARE HEREBT CALLED TO THIS ALTAR

TO DO SERVICE

The menfolk of both Rong-guo and Ning-guo House had taken courage from the presence of the priests, and were gathered in the Garden to watch the demon-hunt.

'Most impressive!' they all agreed. 'All those benevolent spirits and powers are bound to strike fear into the heart of even the most obdurate demon!'

They crowded in front of the altar to watch the rest of the proceedings. The young banner-bearing Deacons took up their positions in the hall, one group at each of the Five Cardinal Points, North, East, South, West and Centre, and awaited their orders. The three priests stood on the lower steps of the altar: one held the Magic Sword and the Holy Water, one the black Seven Star Banner, and one the peach-wood Demon Whip. The music ceased. The gong sounded thrice, the monks intoned a prayer, and the cohorts of banner-bearers began performing circular gyrations. The priests then descended from the altar and instructed the Jia menfolk to conduct them to every storeyed building, studio, hall, pavilion, chamber, cottage or covered walk, every hillside and water's edge in the Garden. In each place they sprinkled the Holy Water and brandished the Magic Sword. On their return, the gong rang out again, the Seven Star Banner was raised aloft and consecrated, and as it descended the Deacons formed a phalanx around it with their lesser banners, and the Demon Whip was cracked three times in the air.

This, thought the Jias, must be the climactic moment; now at last the entire company of evil spirits would be routed and captured. They thronged forward to be in at the finish. But nothing seemed to happen. No apparition, no sound; only the voice of one of the priests, ordering the Deacons to 'bring on the jars'. These receptacles were duly 'brought on', and in them the priests proceeded to 'confine' the invisible spirits, sealing them afterwards with official seals. The Abbot inscribed some magical characters in vermilion, and put the jars to one side, giving orders that they should be taken back to the temple. There they were to be placed beneath a pagoda, whose geomantic location would ensure that they and their contents were safely 'contained'. The

temporary altar was dismantled and thanks given to the Heavenly Powers. Jia She made a solemn kowtow of gratitude to the Abbot.

Afterwards Jia Rong and the younger men of the family had a good laugh about it all in private:

'All that pantomime to catch the evil spirits! They might at least have let us have a look! What a farce! They probably didn't manage to catch a single one!'

'Fools!' snapped Cousin Zhen, when he heard this. 'Evil spirits don't behave like that at all. At certain times they condense into crude matter, at others they dissolve into the ether. With so many benevolent spirits present of course they wouldn't dare take on material form. It's their etheric form that's in question here. *That* is what Their Holinesses have taken hold of; by so doing they have rendered the spirits harmless. *That* is how the magic works.'

The younger generation were only half-convinced, and reserved their judgement until such time as they could observe a more visible diminution in demonic activity; the servants, who were told quite firmly that the spirits had now been caught, became less apprehensive as a result, and no further incidents or sightings were reported; while Cousin Zhen and the other invalids made a complete recovery (which *they* had no hesitation in attributing to the efficacy of the monks' spells).

There was, however, one page-boy who continued to find the whole episode highly amusing, and who shared his amusement with the others:

'I don't know what the earlier business was about, but that day we were in the Garden with Sir She, it was nothing more than a big pheasant that took off out of the undergrowth and went flying past us. Old Ropey got the fright of his life and thought he'd seen a ghost or something. He made a great song and dance about it afterwards. Most of the others believed him and backed him up, and Sir She swallowed the whole thing. Oh well, at least they put on a nice bit of mumbo-jumbo for us!'

But no one was convinced by his version of the story. And certainly no one was willing to live in the Garden again.

*

Some days later, when things had quietened down somewhat, Jia She thought he might discreetly move a few servants back into the Garden as caretakers, to make sure that no undesirable characters tried to sneak their way in there at night. He was about to issue instructions to this effect when Jia Lian came in.

'I have just been to visit Uncle Wang Zi-teng's family,' he said, after paying his respects, 'and while I was there I heard the most devastating piece of news. Uncle Zheng has apparently been impeached by the Viceroy! The charge against him is that he failed to control his subordinates and was responsible for the requisitioning of extortionate quantities of tax-grain. The Viceroy has asked for his dismissal.'

Jia She was stunned:

'This must surely be some idle rumour. Why, there was a letter from your uncle Zheng only the other day. Full of good news. He wrote that Tan-chun had arrived safely, and that he had chosen a suitable day to escort her to her future husband's family on the coast. The journey had passed off without mishap. Absolutely no cause for concern. What's more, the Viceroy is supposed to be related to Tanchun's husband, and even gave a party to celebrate the wedding. How could the man impeach his own relative? Well, it's no use speculating like this: you'd better go and see the Civil Office people. Find out what you can, and report straight back to me.'

Jia Lian departed at once, and returned a few hours later.

'It's as I feared, Father. Uncle Zheng *has* been impeached. However, as an act of Imperial clemency his case did not go through the normal channels, but was dealt with directly by His Majesty. I have the exact wording of the Imperial Rescript:

On account of Jia Zheng's failure to control subordinate officials, and on account of the extortionate levying of

tax-grain and cruel exploitation of the common people perpetrated under his administration, he deserves to he dismissed altogether. But because this is his first provincial posting, and because he is inexperienced as an administrator and has in this matter been deceived by his own subordinates, he is only to be demoted three grades, and by a special dispensation will be reinstated as Under-Secretary in the Board of Works. He is to return at once to the capital.

'This news is official. While I was at the Board of Civil Office a county magistrate from Kiangsi came for an audience. He said he was indebted to Uncle Zheng in many ways and had a high opinion of him, but considered him an inept manager of people. His servants got up to all sorts of skulduggery behind his back, and were squeezing the local officials for all they were worth. Uncle's reputation was already ruined. The Viceroy had known about it for some time, and he too was of the opinion that Uncle Zheng was basically a good man. I don't know quite why he brought the impeachment in the end. Perhaps he was afraid that things had got out of hand and that more serious trouble might lie ahead. In using this relatively minor charge as grounds for impeachment, maybe he was really trying to save Uncle Zheng from an even worse fate.'

Jia She interrupted Jia Lian:

'Go and tell your aunt Wang about this straight away. But don't trouble your grandmother at present.'

So Jia Lian went to report to Lady Wang. For the sequel, please turn to the next chapter.

CHAPTER 103

Jin-gui dies by her own hand, caught
in a web of her own weaving
Yu-cun encounters an old friend in vain, blind
to the higher truths of Zen

Jia Lian gave Lady Wang a full account of Jia Zheng's misfortune. The next day he paid another call at the Board of Civil Office, and on his return reported once more to Lady Wang, assuring her that he had done his utmost to put in a word for Jia Zheng in the right quarters.

'So you're sure the news is genuine?' she asked. 'Well, I dare say your Uncle Zheng will be none too displeased. In fact it will come as something of a relief to us all. He was never really suited to a provincial posting, and if he had not come home now I'm afraid those rascals would one day have ruined him altogether!'

'How is it that you are so well informed in this matter?' asked Jia Lian.

'Ever since your uncle Zheng has been at this post,' replied Lady Wang, 'not a penny has been remitted. On the contrary, He has been secretly sending here for considerable sums. You have only to look at the way the servants' wives are already decking themselves out in all sorts of fancy gold and silver ornaments to know what's been going on. It's obvious that their husbands have been making money behind your uncle Zheng's back. He just lets them get away with it. If it had gone any further, not only would he have lost his job but the inherited family rank might have been forfeited as well!'

'You're quite right, Aunt,' said Jia Lian. 'I confess that I was very shocked when I first heard the news. But now that I know the full facts of the case I feel considerably easier about it. It will be much better for Uncle Zheng this way. He will be able to work here in the capital in peace and quiet for a few years, without endangering his reputation any further. I think even Grandmother will be quite relieved when she hears the whole story. But I feel you should break it gently to her all the same.'

'I will,' said Lady Wang. 'You had better go now and see what else you can find out.'

Jia Lian was on his way out when one of Aunt Xue's old serving-women came running past in a great lather. She went directly into Lady Wang's apartment and without any preliminary courtesies burst straight out with:

'Our Madam says I'm to tell Your Ladyship there's terrible trouble at home again! Things have come to a pretty pass this time and no mistake!'

'What sort of trouble?' asked Lady Wang.

‘Oh, something terrible! Just *terrible!’*

‘You stupid old creature!’ exclaimed Lady Wang with a snort of exasperation. ‘If something serious has happened, for goodness’ sake try to tell me what it is!’

‘Master Ke’s away and we haven’t got a man in the house! It’s a crisis and we just don’t know what to do! Please will Your Ladyship send one or two of the Masters over to sort it out for us!’

Lady Wang still had not the slightest idea what she was talking about.

‘Sort out *what* in heaven’s name?’ she asked impatiently.

‘It’s Mrs Pan! She’s dead!’ blurted out the old woman at last.

‘Pfui!’ exclaimed Lady Wang when she heard this. ‘So that baggage is dead! Is *that* what all the fuss is about?’

‘But it wasn’t reg’lar, Your Ladyship. I mean, the way she died. Such a to-do! Please, Your Ladyship, send someone over right away!’

She set off back to the Xue compound. Lady Wang was both annoyed and amused:

‘Honestly, what a hopeless old woman! Lian, go and have a look will you? It’s a complete waste of time trying to make head or tail of anything that old creature says.’

The first part, about ‘going and having a look’, failed to reach the old woman’s ears. She only caught the words ‘a complete waste of time’ and went running home in a great huff to Aunt Xue, who was anxiously awaiting her return:

‘Well, who is Lady Wang going to send?’

The old woman sighed demonstratively:

‘Fat lot of use family are at a time of crisis, I must say! Her Ladyship wouldn’t lift a finger for us! All she did was call me a stupid creature!’

This seemed to make Aunt Xue angry, and she became rather flustered:

‘If Her Ladyship wouldn’t help, what about our own Mrs Bao?’

‘I didn’t even bother to tell her,’ replied the old woman. ‘How could she be expected to stand up for us if Her Ladyship wouldn’t?’

Aunt Xue spat at her, and cried indignantly:

‘Are you out of your mind? Her Ladyship is one of the Jias; but Bao-chai is my own child. She wouldn’t let me down!’

The distinction suddenly seemed to dawn on the old woman.

‘Lawks! I’d better go back and find her right away!’

As they were speaking, Jia Lian came in. He paid his respects to Aunt Xue, and after expressing his condolences went on to explain to her:

‘When Aunt Wang heard that Mrs Pan was dead, she questioned your serving-woman but was unable to extract any sense from her at all. Aunt was very worried and sent me to find out what was going on and to give you a hand. If anything needs doing, Aunt Xue, just let me know and I’ll do what I can.’

Aunt Xue had been working herself into a state of great indignation with the old woman, and had become so distraught she could do nothing but weep. On hearing Jia Lian’s words she became articulate once more:

‘I’m most obliged to you, Lian. I was sure my sister would stand by me. I’m afraid this old woman completely misunderstood you, and gave me a totally misleading impression. Now, please sit down and let me tell you the whole story.’

After a slight pause she continued: ‘How shall I put it...? Well, in a nutshell, my daughter-in4aw did not die a natural death.’

‘I suppose it was suicide?’ ventured Jia Lian. ‘Was it despondency at Cousin Pan’s imprisonment that drove her to take her own life?’

‘If only it had been! Alas, no. Let me explain. For several months she’d been rampaging about the whole time, barefoot and with her hair in a terrible state. When she heard that Pan was facing a death sentence, after an

initial fit of weeping she began painting herself up dreadfully with rouge and powder. Any remonstrations on my part would only have led to more atrocious scenes, so I tried to turn a blind eye. Then suddenly one day, for some reason unknown to me, she came and asked me if she could have Caltrop to keep her company. I said to her: "You've already got Moonbeam. Do you really need Caltrop as well? You've never liked her, so why go asking for trouble?' But she insisted, and I had no choice but to send Caltrop over to her room. The poor girl didn't dare disobey my orders and she went, ill though she was.

'Funnily enough, my daughter-in-law treated her very well. I was delighted; and although Chai suspected some ulterior motive, I was prepared to give her the benefit of the doubt. Anyway, a few days ago, Caltrop fell ill again, and Jin-gui cooked her some soup. She even made a point of serving it to her with her own hands. Poor Caltrop! There was the most unfortunate accident. Jin-gui dropped the soup just as she was coming up to the bedside, scalded herself and broke the bowl as well. I would have expected her to have blamed Caltrop; but no, she wasn't in the least angry, just went off at once to fetch a broom, swept up the pieces and gave the floor a good clean. Afterwards the two of them still seemed on friendly terms.

'Then yesterday evening she told Moonbeam to go and make two bowls of soup, which she said she would drink with Caltrop. It was a little later that we heard this terrific hullabaloo coming from her apartment. First Moonbeam started screaming her head off, then Caltrop screamed too and staggered out, leaning on the wall for support and calling for help. I went in at once and found Jin-gui writhing on the floor, with blood streaming from her nose and eyes; she was clutching feverishly at her stomach with both hands, and kicking both feet in the air. I was scared out of my wits. I asked her to tell me what had happened, but she was too far gone to answer, and after a few more minutes of agony she died. It looked very much like a case of poisoning to me.

'Then Moonbeam started wailing again and laid hold of Caltrop, claiming that it was her doing. But I hardly think Caltrop is that sort of person. Besides, she was almost too ill to get out of bed; how could she have had the strength to do such a thing? Moonbeam insisted, however, and still insists, that Caltrop is the culprit. My dear Lian! What was I to do? In the circumstances I had no choice but to tell the old women to bind Caltrop, to hand her over to Moonbeam and to lock them both in the room. Bao-qin and I have been up all night keeping watch, and we sent word to you the moment the gates were opened this morning. Lian, you know about such things. What's the proper course of action for me to take?'

'Do Jin-gui's family know yet?' asked Jia Lian.

'I thought it better to try to disentangle the whole affair ourselves before letting *anyone* know.'

'I would advise you to report what's happened to the authorities first and let them reach their own conclusions. It's only natural that we should suspect Moonbeam, but they might ask what Moonbeam would have stood to gain by poisoning her own mistress. And in a way it might almost seem more plausible to them that Caltrop should have done it.'

As they were speaking, some serving-women from Rong-guo House came in to announce the arrival of Bao-chai. Jia Lian decided that, although strictly speaking she was his younger cousin's wife, he need not withdraw; after all, she was also his cousin and he had known her from childhood. She greeted her mother and Jia Lian, and went in to sit with Bao-qin in the inner room. Aunt Xue joined her there and told her the story.

'Surely, by binding Caltrop we are virtually admitting her guilt?' was Bao-chai's immediate response. 'If Moonbeam made the soup, then *she* should be bound. And we must let the Xia family know, and report the death to the authorities.'

This seemed logical enough to Aunt Xue. She asked Jia Lian for his opinion:

'Chai is absolutely right. I'd better go and have a word with someone at the Board of Punishment, to make sure there's no trouble at the inquest. But I think it will be a bit hard to justify releasing Caltrop if we then bind Moonbeam instead.'

'I never wanted to bind Caltrop in the first place,' said Aunt Xue, 'but I was afraid that this unjust accusation, coming on top of her illness, might drive her to desperate measures. She might try to commit suicide, and then

we'd have another death on our hands. It was for her own safety that I tied her up and handed her over to Moonbeam.'

'Quite,' said Jia Lian. 'But still, we have rather played into Moonbeam's hands. I think our principle now must be that, if one of them is bound, both must be bound; if one is set free, both must be set free. They were both present at the time of Jin-gui's death. Meanwhile we must send someone to comfort Caltrop.'

Aunt Xue told her serving-woman t6 open the door of Jin-gui's apartment and go in, while Bao-chai ordered some of her own women to accompany them and help them tie up Moonbeam. When they arrived they found Caltrop sobbing her heart out and Moonbeam gloating over her. Moonbeam fought back tooth and nail when they laid hands on her, but the women were too strong. After much shouting from Moonbeam they tied her up, and left the door open so that the two suspects could be more conveniently watched over.

Word had already been sent to Jin-gui's family. The Xias had originally lived outside the capital, but recently their circumstances had become much reduced, and partly for this reason, partly to be near Jin-gui, they had moved into town. Jin-gui's father was already dead, and the only surviving members of her family were her mother and her newly adopted brother, Xia San, a ne'er-do-well who had succeeded in squandering what remained of the family's resources. Now that they were living in town, he became a frequent visitor at the Xue household. Jin-gui was a fickle creature, little suited to the role of the faithful, pining wife. Her failure to entrap Xue Ke had left her ravenous for the slightest morsel, and now even this adopted brother of hers seemed an acceptable means of assuaging her desire. Xia San, however, was a trifle on the slow side, and although he sensed her intentions soon enough, held back from steering his craft directly into her capacious harbour. Jin-gui paid more and more frequent visits to her family, taking with her presents of money to pave the way for Xia San's eventual capitulation.

On the day in question, the day after Jin-gui's sudden death, he was eagerly awaiting one of these visits, and when the Xue servants arrived, he assumed that they had been sent by his sister to deliver one of her little parcels. When they told him instead that she was dead, and that it was, by all accounts, a case of poisoning, he flew into a storm and began ranting and raving at them. Mrs Xia, when she heard the news, wept volubly:

'She was doing quite nicely for herself there! What could she possibly want to go and take poison for? It must have been one of them that did it!'

Still weeping and protesting loudly, she called Xia San to accompany her, and set off at once on foot, without waiting to send for a carriage. The Xias were originally business-people with little breeding, and now that they were poor had no residual concern for appearances. Xia San went ahead, and his adoptive mother followed him out of the gate, weeping and wailing all the while, accompanied by a lame old serving-woman. She eventually hailed a rickety old cart

that was passing in the street, and it carried them at full speed to the Xue compound, where she went in without a word of greeting, sobbing, 'My child! My darling!'

Jia Lian had gone to enlist support at the Board of Punishment, and Aunt Xue, Bao-chai and Bao-qin were holding the fort on their own. Mrs Xia's dramatic entry quite nonplussed them, and at first they were too frightened to say anything. Bao-chai and Bao-qin withdrew to the inner room. When Aunt Xue tried to reason with the intruders, Mrs Xia completely ignored her.

'What good has my daughter ever had from this family of yours?' she cried. 'Day and night she's had to put up with beatings and abuse. In the end you decided to separate her from her husband come what may, and even managed to get my son-in4aw locked up in prison. You and *your* daughter were comfortable enough, thanks to all those important relatives of yours, but my daughter's very existence was still a thorn in your flesh, so you wanted to get rid of her for good and finally found someone to poison her. Poisoned herself indeed!'

She lunged at Aunt Xue, who backed out of her way, exclaiming:

‘Mrs Xia! Kindly go and examine your daughter for yourself and speak to Moonbeam first, before making such wild accusations!’

As Xia San was still there in the room, lurking in the background, Bao-chai and Bao-qin were unable to come to Aunt Xue’s defence and could only remain anxiously closeted in the inner room. By a fortunate coincidence, however, Lady Wang had just sent Zhou Rui’s wife over to see how things were. When she came in and saw this elderly woman abusing and threatening Aunt Xue, she deduced that it must be Jin-gui’s mother and approached her at once:

‘Would you be Mrs Xia, ma’am? I suppose you know that Mrs Pan took poison? That’s how she died, and it has nothing whatever to do with Mrs Xue. There is really no call for you to slander her in this way!’

‘And who might you be?’ asked Jin-gui’s mother.

Aunt Xue, her confidence a little restored by the arrival of reinforcements, answered for Mrs Zhou:

‘This good woman works for our relations the Jias.’

‘Oh! Does she now?’ sneered Mrs Xia. ‘We all know about your wonderful relations! No doubt it’s thanks to them that you managed to get your own son locked up in gaol. And now I suppose you are hoping to get away scot-free with the murder of my daughter too!’ She seized Aunt Xue.

‘Out with it!’ she cried. ‘How *did* you do it? Let me see the body.’

Zhou Rui’s wife attempted to pacify her:

‘By all means. Go and have a look. But kindly take your hands off Mrs Xue!’

She finally succeeded in puffing Mrs Xia away from Aunt Xue. Xia San now emerged from the shadows to leap to his mother’s rescue:

‘Think you can attack my mother like this and get away with it just because you’re one of *their* servants?’

He threw a chair at Mrs Zhou, which luckily missed. The servants who were with Bao-chai in the inner room heard this rumpus break out and came hurrying in to see what was happening. Fearing that Mrs Zhou might come off worst in the fray, they all surged forward and tried to calm the combatants down. Their threats and cajolements were in vain: mother and son merely grew more strident in their protestations and more desperate in their actions.

‘We don’t need reminding how powerful your Rong-guo relations are! What do we care! Now that Jin-gui’s gone, we might as well fight it out to the death!’

Mrs Xia charged at Aunt Xue again with all her might. Despite their numbers, the servants could not withstand her. As the saying goes:

> If a man stakes all on his attack,
> Ten thousand men won’t hold him back.

It was at this moment of crisis that Jia Lian returned, accompanied by seven or eight servants. Seeing how things stood, he ordered his men to drag Xia San outside, and told the ladies to stop fighting at once:

‘Surely you can settle your differences in a more civilized fashion? Now, tidy the place up. The officers from the Board of Punishments will be here any minute to conduct the inquest.’

Mrs Xia had been in full spate when Jia Lian made his entrance. She was somewhat overawed by this strange gentleman with his retinue of servants, some of whom were already barking orders while others stood respectfully to attention, and she wondered which member of the Jia family it could be. Then she saw her adopted son taken away, and heard that the Board of Punishments had been informed and would shortly be holding an inquest, which ruined all her plans. She had originally intended to inspect her daughter’s corpse, create a terrific fuss and go crying for justice; but now they had beaten her to it, and the wind was quite taken out of her sails. Aunt Xue for her part was too frightened to do anything. It was Mrs Zhou who said to Jia Lian:

‘These people barged in, and without so much as a look at Mrs Pan this lady began to slander Mrs Xue. We

tried to talk some sense into her, but then this ruffian butted in, and started using the most dreadful language in front of the young ladies. What a shocking way to carry on!'

'There's no point arguing with him now,' replied Jia Lian. 'It would only be a waste of time. When they question him under torture, he'll remember soon enough that the inner apartments are strictly reserved for women and that he has no right to be in here. His mother could surely have come to inspect her daughter's corpse by herself. It will look extremely suspicious to the authorities, very much as if *he* had come to rob the place.'

Jia Lian's men managed by one means or another to keep Xia San under control outside, while Mrs Zhou, emboldened by the presence of so many Jia supporters, began denouncing Mrs Xia in earnest:

'Really, madam, you should know better. You should have found out the facts when you arrived. Your daughter *must* have poisoned hersel£ The only other person it could have been is Moonbeam. Why go slandering without bothering to find out the truth and without so much as seeing the corpse for yourself? Do you think ours is the kind of family to stand by and let a daughter4n-law die without discovering the cause of her death?

'Moonbeam and Caltrop have both been bound. Your daughter had asked for Caltrop to move into her room earlier, because she said she wanted to keep an eye on her illness. That's why Caltrop was also there at the time of Mrs Pan's death. We were hoping that you could be present at the inquest and hear the officer establish the truth of the matter.'

Jin-gui's mother knew that she was beaten, and she followed Zhou Rui's wife into Jin-gui's apartment. She saw her daughter's corpse lying stiff on the kang, the face caked in dry blood, and at once broke down and began sobbing. Moonbeam, seeing someone from 'her side', cried out:

'Madam was so kind to Caltrop! She even shared her own room with her! But Caltrop grabbed the first chance that came along of poisoning her!'

The Xue family and servants raised a cry of protest:

'Nonsense! Who was it cooked the soup that Mrs Pan drank before she died? You!'

'I cooked it and served it,' said Moonbeam, 'but then I had to go out on an errand. Caltrop must have got up and put poison in the soup while I was out.'

Before Moonbeam could finish speaking Jin-gui's mother lunged at Caltrop and could only be restrained by the concerted efforts of the servants. Aunt Xue spoke next:

'This looks very much like a case of arsenic poisoning to me. We certainly don't keep any arsenic in the house. Whoever it was that did this must have commissioned someone else to buy the poison in town. The truth will come out at the inquest. Well, we'd best tidy her up and lay her out properly now in readiness for the officer from the Board of Punishments.'

The old serving-women came forward, lifted Jin-gui up and laid her out.

'With so many men about,' said Bao-chai, 'you had better clear away all those women's knick-knacks.'

As they were tidying up, a little crumpled paper package came to light beneath the mattress on the kang. Jin-gui's mother spotted it and picked it up to inspect it more closely. It was empty and she threw it down again. Moonbeam saw it, however, and cried out:

'Look! There's evidence! I recognize that package. A few days ago we were having a lot of trouble with mice, and when Mrs Pan went on one of her trips home, she asked her brother to buy some poison. It was in that package. I remember her putting it away in one of her jewellery boxes when she got back. Caltrop must have seen it there and used it to poison Mrs Pan. If you don't believe me, have a look in the jewellery box and see if there's any left.'

Jin-gui's mother did this. She opened the jewellery box, which was empty save for a few silver hairpins.

'What has become of all her jewellery?' said Aunt Xue in surprise.

Bao-chai told the servants to open the trunks and cupboards. All were empty.

‘Who could have taken all these things?’ she asked. ‘We had better question Moonbeam.’

Jin-gui’s mother seemed to become very apprehensive all of a sudden.

‘Why should Moonbeam know about my daughter’s things?’ she protested.

‘Come, ma’am,’ put in Zhou Rui’s wife, ‘that’s hardly a very sensible question. Miss Moonbeam was with Mrs Pan all the time. Of course she’d know.’

Moonbeam could see she was cornered, and would have to tell the truth:

‘Madam used to take things with her whenever she went home. There was nothing I could do about it.’

A roar of indignation burst from the Xue camp:

‘So that’s it! Really, Mrs Xia! A fine mother you are! You talk your daughter into stealing our things; and then when the supply runs out, you force her to commit suicide so that you can blackmail us! They’ll be *very* interested to hear *that* at the inquest!’

‘Go outside,’ said Bao-chai, ‘and tell Mr Lian that the Xias must on no account be allowed to leave.’

Jin-gui’s mother was now in a state of extreme trepidation, and cursed Moonbeam roundly:

‘You little hussy! You scandal-monger! When did my daughter ever steal any of their things?’

‘Stealing’s nothing,’ retorted Moonbeam coolly, ‘compared to murder; and I don’t mean to let myself be called a murderer in order to cover up for a thief.’

‘If we can find the missing things, we’ll know who the murderer is,’ said Bao-qin. ‘Someone quickly go and find Lian. He can ask that Xia fellow about the buying of the arsenic. They’ll want to know about that at the inquest.’

Jin-gui’s mother began to panic:

‘Moonbeam must be possessed to speak such nonsense! When did my daughter ever buy arsenic? If you ask me, it was Moonbeam herself!’

‘That’s going too far!’ cried Moonbeam wildly. ‘I’m not taking that - not from you! Why, it was the two of you who were always telling Mrs Pan to stand up for her rights! It was you who advised her to make life unbearable for Mr Pan’s family, and then, when they were ruined, to walk off with every last button in the house and find herself a decent husband! Do you deny that?’

Before Jin-gui’s mother could reply, Zhou Rui’s wife cried with glee:

‘Denounced by one of your own servants! Well, what have you got to say for yourself now?’

J in-gui’s mother cursed Moonbeam again, and gnashing her teeth said bitterly:

‘Haven’t I treated you well? Are you trying to drive me to the grave? At the inquest, I shall testify that it was you who did it!’

Moonbeam glared at her angrily and then turned to Mrs Xue:

‘Please release Caltrop, ma’am. There’s no sense in harming an innocent person like this. I shall tell the whole truth at the inquest.’

Bao-chai immediately instructed the servants to release Moonbeam instead, and said:

‘Come on, Moonbeam, you’ve always been a straightforward girl. Don’t let yourself get involved in underhand dealings. You’ll only suffer for it. If you’ve something to say, then go ahead and say it. Tell us the truth, and the whole affair can be cleared up once and for all.’

Moonbeam was terrified of being tortured at the inquest, and finally gave in:

‘Every day Mrs Pan used to complain about the way life had treated her. “Why was I born to such a stupid mother?” she’d say. “Instead of showing me some sense and marrying me to Master Ke, she went and chose his half-baked booby of a cousin! I’d gladly die if I could only spend one day with Master Ke!” And then she’d always say how she hated Caltrop. I didn’t pay much attention at first, and later when I began to notice how friendly she was being to Caltrop I supposed that Caltrop must have somehow earned her way back into her good books. I thought Mrs Pan made the soup for her as a kind gesture. Then I discovered that she had something quite different in mind! Something horrible!’

‘That makes no sense at all!’ interrupted Jin-gui’s mother. ‘If you are implying that she intended to do away with Caltrop, then how do you account for the fact that she ended up swallowing the poison herself?’

Bao-chai turned to Caltrop:

‘You tell us what happened yesterday, Caltrop. Did you drink any of the soup?’

‘A few days ago,’ began Caltrop, ‘when I was so ill that I could hardly lift my head, Mrs Pan offered to bring me some soup. I didn’t dare refuse, and I was struggling to sit up when she had an accident on the way and spilt the soup all over the floor. It was a lot of trouble for her, cleaning it all up, and I felt very bad to have been the cause of it. Then yesterday she offered me some soup again, and though I didn’t think I’d ever be able to swallow any of it, I decided I ought to try. I was just getting ready to drink some when I started feeling dizzy. I vaguely remember seeing Moonbeam clear the soup away, and thinking to myself what a relief it was not to have to drink any. But then, just as I was dozing off again, Mrs Pan came over and asked me to try some after all. She was drinking a bowl herself. I tried my hardest and managed to swallow a few mouthfuls.’

‘There you are!’ cried Moonbeam, hardly giving Caltrop time to finish. ‘Now let me complete the picture for you. Yesterday Mrs Pan told me to make two bowls of soup, one for her and one for Caltrop. I was pretty fed up, that Caltrop should be thought important enough for me to have to wait on her. So I deliberately put an extra dollop of salt in one of the bowls, and made a secret mark on the side, intending to give that bowl to Caltrop. As soon as I had brought the soup in, Mrs Pan told me to go and send the boys for a carriage, as she was planning to go home on a visit. I went out, and when I’d done my errand I came back to find Mrs Pan sitting with the salty bowl in front of her. I was afraid that if she tasted how salty it was she would be very cross with me. I was wondering what to do, when luckily Mrs Pan left the room for a moment to relieve herself, and I was able to change the bowls round. It must have been fated that I should do so. When Mrs Pan came back, she took the salty soup to Caltrop’s bedside and begged her to try some, drinking some from her own bowl (the one originally intended by her for Caltrop) at the same time. Caltrop didn’t seem to notice the salt, and they both finished their bowls. I was laughing to myself, thinking what a rough palate Caltrop must have. I didn’t realize then that Mrs Pan had plotted to poison Caltrop and had sprinkled arsenic in her soup while I was out of the room. And then later while *she* was outside, I changed the bowls round. And she never noticed. As the saying goes:

It all fell out as Providence planned;
The sinner died by her own hand!’

They pondered the details of Moonbeam’s story, and it impressed them as both plausible and consistent.

Caltrop was duly released, and they helped her back into bed.

Jin-gui’s mother, meanwhile, growing more and more fearful with every minute, was racking her brains for some way of rebutting Moonbeam’s accusations. After a good deal of discussion Aunt Xue and the other members of the family concluded that under the circumstances Xia San was the one who should be held responsible, as Jin-gui’s accomplice. They were still debating heatedly how to deal with the matter when they heard Jia Lian call from outside:

‘No more chatter! Get the place looking decent. The officer from the Board is on his way.’

Mrs Xia and her son were frantic. It seemed inevitable that they would come out badly at the inquest. At last Mrs Xia begged Aunt Xue:

‘Please accept my humble apologies. It seems my daughter was misguided in her ways, and that she has met the end she deserved. If there is an inquest, it will look bad for your family too. I beg you to let the matter drop!’

‘That is out of the question!’ objected Bao-chai. ‘It has already been reported. We can’t let it drop now.’

Mrs Zhou offered her services as a mediator: -

‘The only way the matter could be dropped would be if Mrs Xia herself were to go forward and ask them to dispense with the inquest. In that case we wouldn’t raise any objections.’

Xia San, who was being held outside, agreed after a certain amount of intimidation from Jia Lan to intercept the officer and make a written request for suspension of the inquest. The others all approved this course of action. Aunt Xue gave orders for a coffin to be purchased and for all the other funeral arrangements to be seen to. But at this point our narrative turns elsewhere.

*

Jia Yu-cun had recently been promoted to the post of Mayor of the Metropolitan Prefecture, with additional duties as Collector of Taxes. He went out one day on a tour of inspection of the agricultural area newly brought under cultivation, and his route took him through the shire of Innsite. When he came to the riverside hamlet of Rushford Hythe, he halted his sedan at the water’s edge and waited for his servants to catch up with him, when they would all take the ferry to the other side. He noticed a small broken-down temple on the outskirts of the village, with a few gnarled old pine-trees poking their branches up through the ruins. Stepping down from his sedan, he wandered over at a leisurely pace and strolled into the temple. The gilt was peeling from the statues, and the courtyard was in a state of extreme dilapidation. At one side stood a broken stone tablet with a worn and barely legible inscription. Yu-cun was crossing the rear courtyard towards the back hall of the temple when he saw, in the shade of a cypress tree, a lean-to shed with a thatched roof, and inside the shed a Taoist monk, seated with his eyes closed, deep in meditation. Going closer and gazing into the man’s face, Yu-cun was struck by a strange familiarity, a feeling of having seen him somewhere before - though where he could not for the moment recall. His attendants were about to wake the Taoist rudely from his meditations, but Yu-cun stopped them and, advancing respectfully, addressed him with the words:

‘Venerable Master!’

The Taoist opened both eyes a slit and gave a faint smile.

‘What brings you here, sir?’

‘A tour of inspection has led me to these parts,’ replied Yu-cun. ‘Seeing your reverence so rapt in meditation, and deducing from this the profundity of your spiritual attainments, I most humbly crave from you some words of truth.’

‘There is ever a whence, and always a whither.’

Yu-cun sensed something very mysterious about the old man. Making a deep bow, he enquired:

‘From which monastery does your reverence hail? What is the name of this temple where you have made your hermitage? How many live here? If it is a life of pure contemplation that you seek, surely one of the sacred mountains would be a more conducive dwelling place? And if it is good works that you wish to pefform, would not the busy thoroughfare be more appropriate?’

‘A bottle-gourd is ample for my needs,’ replied the Taoist. ‘Why build my hut on some famous mountain? As for this temple, only a crumbling tablet of stone remains to point to its long-forgotten origins. And why should I strive to do good works, when body and shadow suffice? I am no “jewel in the casket” biding “till one should come to buy”, no “jade-pin in the drawer hid, waiting its time to fly”.’

Yu-cun had always been a smart fellow. The reference to ‘the bottle-gourd’ and to his own couplet (written when he had been a poor lodger at the Bottle-gourd Temple in Soochow) at once brought to mind his neighbour from days gone by, old Zhen Shi-yin. Scrutinizing the Taoist again, he recognized him and saw that his old benefactor’s face had not changed. He dismissed his attendants.

‘Tell me the truth, sir,’ he enquired confidentially, when they were alone. ‘Are you not old Mr Zhen?’

A faint smile crossed the old man's face.

'What is truth, and what fiction? You must understand that truth is fiction, and fiction truth.'

Yu-cun's certainty was increased by the fact that the old man's words contained a pun on their names, Zhen being homophonous with 'truth', and Jia with 'fiction'. He bowed afresh and said:

'When your great generosity enabled me to travel to the capital, I enjoyed good fortune, and thanks to your blessing obtained the highest distinction in my examinations and was appointed to the very district to which you yourself had moved. That was where I first learned that you had achieved enlightenment and had renounced the world, to soar in the realm of the immortals. Although I sought anxiously to trace your whereabouts, in the end I came to the conclusion that a common layman such as myself, soiled with the dust of this mortal world, would never be granted another chance to behold your holy face. How blessed I am indeed to have encountered you again! I beg you, holy sir, to relieve my benighted ignorance. If you deign to accede to my request, allow me to provide for you and accommodate you in my humble abode close by in the capital, that I may derive daily benefit from your wisdom.'

The Taoist rose to his feet and returned the bow.

'Beyond my prayer-mat,' he replied, 'I know nothing. Of what Your Honour has just spoken I have understood not a single word.'

He resumed his sitting position. Yu-cun began to have misgivings.

'But surely,' he thought to himself, 'it must be him? The face, the voice are so familiar! After these nineteen years his complexion is quite unchanged. It must be that he has achieved a high degree of spiritual cultivation, and is therefore reluctant to reveal his former identity. He considers himself a new man. But he is my benefactor. Now that I have found him again, I must think of some way to show my gratitude. If material things cannot move him, still less I suppose will any mention of his wife and child.'

After reflecting thus, Yu-cun spoke:

'Venerable Sir, I understand that you are reluctant to reveal your former condition. But can you not vouchsafe your disciple some sign of recognition?'

He was about to prostrate himself when his attendants came to announce that it was getting late and he should cross the river at once. Yu-cun was hesitating, when the Taoist spoke to him again:

'Cross with all speed to the other side, Your Honour. We will meet again. Delay now, and a storm may arise. If you really deign to come again, I look forward to seeing you here by the ford another day.'

He closed his eyes and was lost once more in his meditations. Yu-cun, with some reluctance, bade him farewell and made his way out of the temple. He had reached the bank of the river and was preparing to board the ferry and make the crossing, when he saw a man running towards him at full pelt.

To learn who it was, please turn to the next chapter.

CHAPTER 104

Drunken Dime at large again –
a small fish whips up a mighty storm
Our Besotted Hero in agony once more –
a chance thrust quickens a numbed heart

'The temple you visited has just caught fire, sir!'

Jia Yu-cun turned round, to see flames leaping from the ground and a cloud of whirling ashes darkening the sky.

‘How extraordinary!’ he thought to himself. ‘I left the place only minutes ago, and have walked but this little distance. How could such a fire have started? What if old Mr Zhen has perished in it?’

To return and investigate would almost certainly make him late for the ferry. On the other hand he felt a little uneasy about not going back at all. After a moment’s thought, he asked the man:

‘Did you notice whether the old Taoist managed to escape or not?’

‘I was not far behind you, sir. I had a stomach-ache, and went for a bit of a stroll. That was when I looked back. When I saw the blaze and realized it was the temple that was on fire, I came here as fast as I could to let you know. I certainly didn’t see anyone coming out of the flames.’

His twinge of conscience notwithstanding, Yu-cun was at heart a man who put his career first, and he felt insufficient concern to involve (and inconvenience) himself any further.

‘Wait here until the fire has died down,’ he told the servant. ‘Then go back and see if you can find any trace of the old man. Report to me directly.’

‘Yes, sir.’ Reluctantly the man stayed behind to carry out these instructions.

J ia Yu-cun crossed the river and continued his tour of inspection, putting up for the night, a few stops later, at the official lodgings provided. Next morning, his duties were completed and he was greeted at one of the city gates by the usual throng of runners, who then escorted him through the streets with a great deal of noise and pomp. On the way, he heard from within his sedan one of the criers having some kind of altercation in the street, and asked what the trouble was. A man was dragged forward and deposited kneeling at the foot of the sedan. The crier himself then fell to his knees and gave the following account of the incident:

‘This drunkard, instead of keeping out of Your Honour’s way, came lurching right in front of your chair, sir. I told him to get off the road, but he answered back in a drunken and insolent manner, threw himself down on the ground in the middle of the street, and accused me of hitting him.’

J ia Yu-cun addressed the offender directly:

‘This entire district, as you know, is in my charge, and every one of its residents falls under my jurisdiction. You, sir, must have known this only too well, and must also have been aware of my presence in these parts. In your drunken state the very least you could have done was to keep out of my way. But instead you have polluted the highway with your obnoxious person, and have then had the effrontery to slander one of my men! Explain yourself!’

‘Paid fir the wine meself, din I?’ grumbled the man. ‘An’ the ground’s ‘is Majesty’s, innit? ‘is Majesty never said I couldn’t sleep on it if I’d adda few! Can’t see what it’s gorra do with you, yerroner!’

‘Why, this fellow seems to consider himself completely above the law!’ snapped Jia Yu-cun angrily. ‘What’s his name?’

‘Ni Er,’ replied the man. ‘But they calls me the Drunken Diamond.’

Jia Yu-cun was not amused.

‘Give this precious rogue a good thrashing,’ he ordered grimly, adding by way of a vicious pun: ‘That should soon cut him down to size!’

His attendants pinned Ni Er to the ground and administered a few hefty cracks of the whip. The pain soon cleared Dime’s head, and he began begging abjectly for mercy. Yu-cun laughed loudly at him from his chair:

‘Diamond, indeed! All right, leave him alone for the present. Take him back to the yamen. We can question him at leisure there.’

There was a cry from the runners, who immediately bound Dime and dragged him along behind the chair, ignoring his continued pleas for mercy.

Yu-cun went first to the Palace to report on his tour, and then returned to his yamen, where daily business soon engulfed him. He was too busy to give Dime another thought. But the bystanders who had witnessed the flogging in the street lost no time in telling the story to their friends, and the news soon spread that Ni Er the swank, Ni Er the drunken bully, had fallen foul of Mayor Jia and landed himself in deep water. Rumour of it

eventually reached the ears of his wife and daughter, and that night when he failed to come home his daughter, fearing the worst, went to all the gambling-dens in search of him. His cronies only confirmed the story, and Dime's daughter was reduced to tears at the thought of what might have happened to her father.

'Don't take it to heart so, miss!' they said. 'That Mayor Jia's related to the Rong-guo Jias. And isn't young Jia Yun a buddy of your dad's? Why don't you and your mum go and ask *him* to put in a word for Dime? That should fix it.'

Dime's daughter thought this over to herself:

'They're right. Father has often said how friendly he is with young Mr Jia Yun next door. Perhaps I should go and see him.'

She hurried home and told her mother, and the following morning the two of them went to call on Jia Yun. He happened to be at home that day, and invited them both in, while his mother told the little maid to serve them tea. They related the story of Dime's arrest, and begged Jia Yun to help them secure his release.

'Of course!' agreed Jia Yun without the slightest hesitation. 'No 3 trouble at all. I'll drop in at Rong-guo House, mention it to them, and the matter will soon be settled. This Mayor Jia owes everything to his connection with the Rong-guo Jias. One word from them and Dime will be a free man again!'

Dime's wife and daughter returned home in high spirits and with great expectations. They went to visit Dime in the yamen where he was being held prisoner, and told him the good news, that thanks to 3 the intervention of Jia Yun and the Jia family he would shortly be set free. Dime was greatly relieved.

Unfortunately Jia Yun, having had his previous overtures rebuffed by Xi-feng, had been too cowed to visit her again, and since that day had hardly set foot inside Rong-guo House. The men on the Rongguo gate treated callers strictly according to their standing with the family. If the family were known to have received a person with cordiality and respect, that person was welcomed and announced immediately; if' on the other hand, a person had once been cold- shouldered, the servants were quick to take their cue. If such a person called again, even if he were a relative, they would refuse to report his arrival and would send him away without more ado. So, when Jia Yun turned up and asked to pay his respects to Jia Lian, he got a very cool reception at the gate:

'Mr Lian is not in. When he comes home, we will inform him that you called.'

Jia Yun would have persisted and asked to see Mrs Lian, but he was afraid to provoke the gatemen any further, and with some reluctance turned about and went home. He had to face renewed importuning from Dime's wife and daughter the next day:

'But Mr Yun! We thought you said the Jias could get anything they wanted out of anyone! You're one of the family, and this isn't a big thing to ask. You can't have failed! You can't let us down like this!'

Jia Yun felt thoroughly humiliated, and tried to bluff his way out:

'Yesterday my relatives were too busy to send anyone. But I'm sure they will do something about it today, and then Dime will be set free. There's really no need to worry.'

Dime's wife and daughter waited to see how things would turn out. Jia Yun, having failed to gain access by the front entrance of Rong-guo House, now tried the back, thinking he might be able to get in touch with Bao-yu in the Garden. To his surprise he found the garden gate locked, and was obliged to return home once more, dejected and crestfallen.

'It was only a few years ago that Dime lent me that money,' he thought to himself. 'I used it to buy Mrs Lian a present of camphor and musk, and as a result she gave me the tree-planting job. But this time, just because I can't afford presents, I get the brush-off. She's got nothing to be proud of' lending out money - money that's been handed down in the family - while poor householders like us can't even borrow a tael when we need it. I suppose she thinks she's being clever, that this is a nice little nest-egg, a clever way to protect her own future. She doesn't know what a stinking reputation she's earned for herself. If I keep my mouth shut, well and good; but if I tell people what I know, she'll have more than one life to answer for in court!'

He found Dime's wife and daughter waiting for him when he got back, and this time he had to admit, albeit in

a modified form, that his mission had not borne fruit:

'The Jias did send someone to put in a word for Dime, but I'm afraid Mayor Jia won't set him free. You might have more luck if you try Mr Leng Zi-xing. He's related to Mrs Zhou, and she works for the Jias.'

'What earthly good will a servant be,' complained Dime's family, 'when a respectable member of the family such as yourself can do nothing for us!'

Jia Yun found this highly mortifying. 'What you don't seem to realize,' he protested indignantly, 'is that nowadays servants can have more pull than their masters!'

Dime's wife and daughter could see that they were wasting their time with him.

'We're much obliged to you for all the trouble you've gone to, Mr Yun,' they muttered sarcastically. 'When Father gets out he's sure to want to thank you himself...'

They went their way. Eventually they found somebody else to assist in the extrication of Dime, who was duly acquitted and released, having suffered no more by way of punishment than a few strokes of the rod.

Upon his return to the family hearth, his womenfolk related to Dime how the Jias had failed to intervene on his behalf. Dime had already broached his first bottle, and angrily announced his intention of seeking out Jia Yun and teaching him a lesson:

'Lousy bastard! Ungrateful, sneaky little sod! When he had an empty belly and needed a job, who did it, who gave him a helping hand? Right first time: yours truly. 'Course, now I'm in a bit of a spot meseff, he doesn't want to know, does he! Bloody marvellous I call it! I'm tellin' you, if I want to, I can take those Jias and rub their snotty little noses in the mud where they belong!'

The women tried anxiously to forestall any more of his grandiose threats:

'Drunk again, Dad! You're out of your mind! The bottle was your undoing a couple of days ago, and you got a good hiding for it. And now hark at you! At it again, before your bruises have even had a chance to heal!'

'Think a licking's going to scare me, do you?' bragged Dime. 'All I needed was a lead. It was all I needed. And now I've got one. Now I can nail'em! Oh yes, I got pally with some fellers while I was inside, and I learnt a thing or two. Accordin' to them, this country's crawling with Jias of one breed or another, and a few days back there was a fair number of Jia servants taken in. I was pretty surprised to hear that. I mean, I knew the younger Jias and *their* servants were a bad lot, but I'd always thought the older ones were all right. How come *they'd* got into trouble?

'In the end, turns out that these Jias they were talking about were all from out of town - course, they're still related to the ones in. town. Anyway, there's been some sort of hoo-ha, so these servants have been sent here for trying. So now I've got my lead! I'm laughing! That little Yun's an ungrateful beggar, that's what he is! My mates and I can spread the word on his family's carry-on, the cheating and bullying, the lending money at wicked rates, the wife-snatching ... Oh, if *that* gets to the top, some heads'll roll all right then! That'll learn 'em who Dime is!'

'Go to sleep, you drunken old pisspot!' cried Dime's missus. 'Snatching *whose* wife, in the name of heaven? I never heard anything so ridiculous in all my life!'

'Fat lot you'd know, stuck at home all day!' retorted Dime. 'Coupla years back, I was having a throw in one of the dens, met this young feller, name of Zhang, and he told me how his woman was taken off of him by the Jias. Asked me for some advice. I just told him to forget it. Dunno where he is now, haven't seen him these two or three years. Next time I bump into that Zhang feller, I'll know what to tell him. Roast that little Yun alive! Make him crawl on his knees! Got my lead now...'

Dime promptly collapsed onto his bed in a stupor, mumbling incoherently to himself' and was soon soundly asleep. His wife and daughter dismissed his threats as the ravings of a drunkard, and early the next morning Dime set off once more for his gambling haunts, where we must leave him.

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We return to Jia Yu-cun: the morning after his return home, refreshed by a good night's sleep, he told his wife (who, it will be remembered, had once been in service with the Zhen family in Soochow) of his encounter with Zhen Shi-yin. She reproached him for his heartlessness:

'Why did you not go back to look for him? If he has been burnt to death, we will be guilty forever of having done him a great wrong!'

She began to weep, and Jia Yu-cun tried to justify himself:

'How could I have intervened? A being like that lives on a different plane from people like us. He would only have resented the interference.'

At that moment a message was brought in for Yu-cun:

'The runner sent by Your Honour yesterday to investigate the fire at the temple has come to deliver his report.'

Yu-cun strolled out to receive the runner, who dropped one knee to the ground and said:

'I went back as you told me to, sir. I braved the flames and went into the temple to see if I could find the Taoist. His hut was completely razed to the ground, even the wall behind it had collapsed, and there was no trace of the old man. He must have been roasted alive..... All that was left was his prayer-mat, and drinking-gourd; somehow they both seemed to have survived intact. I looked all over the place for any human remains, but there was not so much as a bone to be seen. I was going to bring you the prayer-mat and gourd, to show you, in case you didn't believe me, sir; but when I picked them up they lust turned to ashes in my hands.'

Yu-cun deduced from this account that Zhen Shi-yin's departure from the scene of the fire had been no ordinary death, but rather some miraculous process of etherealization. He dismissed the runner, and went in again to his private apartment, where he made no mention to his wife of Shi-yin's metamorphosis by fire, thinking she would fail to understand and would only be distressed; instead he simply told her that no trace of the old man had been found, and that he had most probably escaped alive.

Leaving his private apartment, Yu-cun went to his study, and was sitting there pondering the few words Zhen Shi-yin had spoken during their brief encounter, when one of his attendants came in to convey an Imperial summons to the Palace, to peruse certain state papers. Yu-cun hurriedly took a sedan-chair to the Palace. As he arrived he overheard someone say:

'The Kiangsi Grain Intendant, Jia Zheng, has been impeached, and is at court to plead for clemency!'

Yu-cun pressed on into the Cabinet Office and greeted the various Ministers of State gathered there. He first performed his duty and glanced through the state papers (which spelled out His Majesty's displeasure with the state of the coastal defences), and then left the Cabinet Office at once to find Jia Zheng and to commiserate with him on his impeachment, expressing his relief that it was not too serious a charge, and asking if his journey to the capital had been a comfortable one. Jia Zheng replied with a detailed account of his misfortunes.

'Has your plea for clemency been presented to the throne yet?' asked Yu-cun.

'It has,' replied Jia Zheng. 'I am expecting to receive the Rescript when His Majesty returns from lunch.'

Even as they were speaking, Jia Zheng was summoned to the Imperial presence, and hurried in. Those senior ministers who were connected with him waited anxiously in one of the antechambers; and when, after a lengthy audience, he finally emerged again, his face beaded with sweat, they all pressed forward to greet him.

'Well?' they asked. 'How did it go?'

'Frightened the life out of me!' gasped Jia Zheng, his tongue popping out of his mouth. 'I must thank you all, gentlemen, for your concern. I am relieved to inform you that I have come out of this business relatively unscathed.'

'On what subjects did His Majesty question you?'

'His first question concerned the smuggling of firearms in Yunnan Province. The original memorial on the case identified the ringleader as a member of the household of Jia Hua, the former Grand Preceptor. His Majesty thought he remembered the name as that of my father's cousin, and asked me if it was indeed the same man. I kowtowed at once and reminded him that my father's cousin was Jia *Dai*-hua. His Majesty

laughed. Then he went on to ask me if there was not another relative of mine named Jia Hua, who had once been President of the Board of War, but had subsequently been demoted and then appointed Mayor.'

Jia Yu-cun was among those present. His more formal personal name was indeed Hua, Yu-cun being merely a commonly used sobriquet, and he nearly jumped out of his skin when he heard this.

'And how did you reply to this, sir?' he asked Jia Zheng.

'I replied most deliberately that the former Grand Preceptor Jia Hua hailed from Yunnan, whereas the Jia who was at present Mayor of the Metropolitan Prefecture was a Chekiang man.

'His Majesty's second question concerned the Jia Fan recently impeached by the Soochow censor. He asked me if this man also belonged to my family. I kowtowed and replied that he did. A cloud seemed to pass over His Majesty's countenance, and he said: "A disgraceful affair, for a man to let his own household servants run riot and lay their hands on the wives of innocent citizens!" I did not dare utter a word: "What relation of yours is this Jia Fan?" "A distant one, Your Majesty," I hastily replied. His Majesty gave a sound of disapproval and told me to withdraw. Altogether, I think you will agree, a most alarming experience!'

'Certainly an astonishing coincidence that these two other cases should have come up at the same time as yours,' concurred the others.

'The cases in themselves are not SQ very remarkable,' replied Jia Zheng. 'But the fact that both the gentlemen concerned belong to the Jia clan certainly bodes ill for us. I suppose in a way it's only to be expected: our clan is, after all, a large one, and over the centuries has spread itself throughout the entire Empire.

'There may be no scandal at present involving our branch of the family directly, but I fear that after this the name Jia will be very much in the forefront of His Majesty's mind. Not a prospect I view with relish, I must say.

'Come, you have nothing to fear,' the others reassured him. 'Remember, the truth will always prevail.'

'I should dearly like to retire from public life altogether,' said Jia Zheng. 'But alas, I can hardly plead old age, and the hereditary family titles are an obligation that neither branch of the family can relinquish.'

'Now that you are reinstated at the Board of Works, sir,' put in Jia Yu-cun, 'I think you will find life a great deal less fraught with difficulty.'

'Metropolitan posts may be less troublesome in principle,' replied Jia Zheng, 'but since I have now served twice in the provinces, there's no saying what unpleasantness may still lie in store for me.'

'We all hold your integrity in the highest esteem,' the others reassured him again. 'And your brother's character is beyond reproach. However, you could perhaps be a little stricter with your nephew and the younger generation.'

'It is true, I have spent far too little time at home,' said Jia Zheng. 'And I have not kept a sufficiently careful watch on my nephew's behaviour. It is something I have been uneasy about myself. Since you have raised this issue, and since I know you to be well disposed towards my family, I would be obliged if you could be a little more specific. Tell me, for example, have you heard of any irregularities in my nephew Zhen's family at Ning-guo House?'

'We have only heard,' they replied) 'that he has somehow managed to fall foul of several Vice-Presidents, not to mention a few eunuch chamberlains at the Palace. It is nothing to worry about unduly as yet, but you should perhaps warn him to he a little more circumspect in future.'

When the conversation was over, the ministers saluted Jia Zheng and took their leave. Jia Zheng returned home, and was welcomed at the main gate by a full turn-out of the younger male Jias. He enquired first after Grandmother Jia, and then they each greeted him in turn, dropping one knee to the ground, and followed him into the mansion. Lady Wang and the other ladies had assembled for a formal welcome in the Hall of Exalted Felicity, after which Jia Zheng went to pay his respects to Grandmother Jia in her private apartment. He told her all his news, and when she asked about Tan-chun, gave her a detailed account of the wedding.

'I had to leave at short notice, and was unable to celebrate the Double Ninth festival with her. But although I

did not see her then myself' some of her husband's family came to visit me and told me that she was getting on very well there. Her father-in4aw and motherin4aw both send you their regards. They said that they might be moving to the capital this winter or next spring, which would certainly be most welcome. But since these recent coastal disturbances, I very much doubt if they will be able to move so soon.'

Grandmother Jia had at first been most upset by the news of Jia Zheng's demotion and return to the capital: apart from anything else it would mean that Tan-chun, who was living so far away from home, would be even more isolated from the family. But when Jia Zheng explained the favourable outcome of his audience with the Emperor, and set her mind at rest about Tan-chun, she cheered up considerably, and a smile could be seen on her face when she told him he could leave. Jia Zheng went next to see his brother, and then the younger men, and it was agreed that they would worship at the family ancestral shrine first thing the following day.

These duties performed, Jia Zheng retreated to his private apartment, where he spoke with Lady Wang and his other womenfolk, and then with Bao-yu, Jia Lan and Jia Huan. To his relief he observed a considerable improvement in Bao-yu, who seemed plumper and healthier than at the time of his departure for Kiangsi. He still knew nothing of the boy's mental derangement, and this discernible outward improvement was a source of some satisfaction to him and a welcome antidote to his own anxieties. He dismissed any reservations he still had about the way in which Grandmother Jia had handled the wedding. Bao-chai too, he noticed, seemed more mature and poised than ever, while young Lan was growing into a fine, cultured young man. Jia Zheng was visibly pleased by what he saw. The only blot on the landscape was Jia Huan. *He* did not seem to have changed in the slightest, and still failed to arouse in his father any flicker of paternal affection or pride.

After a silence lasting several minutes Jia Zheng suddenly seemed to think of something.

'There seems to be one person missing.'

Lady Wang knew he must be thinking of Dai-yu, whose death she had refrained from mentionmg in any of her letters; and as she did not wish to spoil the pleasure of his homecoming by breaking the news to him now, she replied that illness had prevented Dai-yu from being present. This act of deception cut Bao-yu to the quick, but he did his utmost to appear composed, out of respect for his father.

Lady Wang invited all the children and grandchildren to the welcoming feast, and they drank to the Master's return. Xi-feng, although she was strictly the daughter-in-law of Jia She and Lady Xing, was also present by virtue of her role as manageress of the household, helping Bao-chai to pour the wine. Jia Zheng cut the party short, saying that after one more round they should all retire. The servants were also dismissed, with instructions to call on him the next day, after the ancestral sacrifice.

Jia Zheng and Lady Wang were at last alone and able to talk together. Lady Wang was still reluctant to broach any serious topic; when Jia Zheng referred to her brother Wang Zi4eng's death, she did her best not to appear too distressed; and when he mentioned Xue Pan's fresh calamities, her only comment was that he had brought them upon himself. At an opportune moment however she broke the news of Dai-yu's death, which seemed to come as a great shock to Jia Zheng, and to affect him deeply. Tears stole down his cheeks, and he sighed several times. Lady Wang herself could no longer contain her tears. Suncloud and her other maids who were standing close by gave her dress a discreet tug, and she quickly composed herself and steered the conversation towards a more cheerful subject. Soon afterwards they went to bed.

Early next morning, a ceremony was performed in the ancestral shrine, in the presence of all the young male members of the family, and afterwards Jia Zheng received Cousin Zhen and Jia Lian in the gallery at the side of the shrine, where he asked them for a report of the household accounts, which Cousin Zhen supplied, albeit in a highly selective form.

'As I have only just returned home,' commented Jia Zheng, 'I do not intend to subject you to an inquisition now, Zhen. But let me say this: while I have been away, I have heard it said that you have been allowing standards to slip. You must exercise the utmost diligence and caution. You are older than the other members of your generation, and should set an example to the younger ones. There must be no offence caused to people

outside. And that applies to you too, Lian. This is no routine homecoming homily. I have my reasons for warning you. There are things I have heard. I repeat: you must both be more careful in future.'

Cousin Zhen and Jia Lian were by now bright **red** in the face, and all they could muster was a feeble, 'Yes, sir.' Jia Zheng did not pursue the matter any further, but went in to his own reception hall, where all the menservants were waiting for him; thence he proceeded to the inner apartments, to be welcomed by all the maids and serving-women. But we will not describe these events in any great detail.

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Our story returns to Bao-yu, and to the occasion on the previous day when he had been secretly so upset to hear Lady Wang speak of Dai-yu's 'illness'. Jia Zheng had finally granted him permission to leave the family gathering, and he returned to his apartment. He arrived, having cried most of the way there, to find Bao-chai and Aroma chatting together, and went off at once into an outer room to be on his own and nurse his grief in private. Bao-chai told Aroma to take him some tea, and then decided to go out herself and join him, surmising that he was nervous of an impending confrontation with his father, when his failure to make any progress in his studies would be discovered (and no doubt punished). It was therefore her duty to offer him some comfort. Bao-yu turned the misunderstanding to his advantage:

'It's all right. You can go to bed. I just need some time to concentrate and collect my thoughts. Lately my memory has been so poor, and there will be trouble if I make a fool of myself in front of Father. You go to sleep. Aroma can sit up and keep me company for a bit.'

Bao-chai thought it advisable to humour him, and nodded her assent. As soon as she was out of the way, Bao-yu went to find Aroma, and whispered in her ear:

'Please will you ask Nightingale to come and see me? There's something I need to speak to her about. You must explain to her how things really are. Maybe then she'll stop being so angry with me.'

Aroma: 'I thought I heard you say you wanted time to concentrate and collect your thoughts. But now look at you! What kind of concentration is this? Whatever you want to ask her can wait till tomorrow, surely?'

Bao-yu: 'But I have this evening free. Tomorrow who knows what may happen? I may be sent for by Father, and then I won't have a moment to myself. Dear Aroma! Go and do as I say, please!'

Aroma: 'You know perfectly well she won't come unless Mrs Bao sends for her.'

Bao-yu: 'She might do, if you were to explain things to her first.'

Aroma: 'But what do you want me to say?'

Bao-yu: 'Surely by now you know what my feelings are, and why Nightingale has turned against me. It's all because of Dai-yu. It's all a big misunderstanding. You must convince Nightingale that I'm not the faithless monster she takes me for, that it's you and the others who have made me seem like one to her!'

As he said this, he glanced towards the inner room, and pointing in that direction, continued:

'I never wanted to marry *her*. It was forced on me by Grandmother and the rest. It was all a trick. It was they who drove Dai-yu to her death. They were to blame. If only I could have seen her once before she died and been able to tell her the truth! Instead, she died thinking that I had betrayed her! You heard yourself what Cousin Tan said; with her dying breath Dai-yu spoke of me with bitterness and resentment. That's why Nightingale has set herself so violently against me - out of loyalty to her mistress.

'Do *you* think I'm heartless? Think back to Skybright's death. Skybright was only my maid, and not as dear to me as Dai-yu; but even so, when she died I wrote a funeral ode for her and made an offering to her spirit - there's no need to keep it a secret from you any longer. Dai-yu witnessed it with her own eyes. Now she herself is dead; and is she to be ranked lower than Skybright? But I haven't been able to make her an offering of any kind. Won't her spirit see this as further proof of my heartlessness? Won't she feel greater bitterness towards me than ever?'

Aroma: 'I don't understand. If you want to write an ode and make an offering, then go ahead. Who's stopping

you?'

Bao-yu: 'I've wanted to ever since I've been better. But somehow I seem to have lost all inspiration. For another person I might have been content with something uninspired. But for Dai-yu nothing but the very purest and the very best will do. That's why I must see Nightingale. I want to ask her what she can tell me of her mistress's feelings; I want to find out exactly how she came by that knowledge. I can remember what it was like before I fell ill. I can remember Daiyu's feelings towards me then. But from that time onwards, everything becomes a blur in my mind. Didn't you tell me that her health had improved? Then why did death come so quickly? What did she say when I didn't visit her, while she was still well? And then when I fell ill, did she ever say why she never came to see me? I managed to get her belongings brought over here, but Mrs Bao won't let me touch them. I don't understand why.'

Aroma: 'Because she's afraid it will only upset you. Why else?'

Bao-yu: 'I don't believe that. There must be mote to it. Then again, if Dai-yu cared about me, or missed me, why did she burn her poems before she died? Surely she would have left them for me as a memento? It's all so confusing. And what about the music that was heard in the air when she died? She must have become a fairy, or risen to heaven in the form of an immortal. If it comes to that, I don't even know if she's really dead. I've only seen the coffin; how **can** I be sure that she is still inside it?'

> Aroma:'Honestly! You get more ridiculous with every word! Are you trying to suggest that she could have been put in the coffin while she was still alive, and then somehow climbed out of it?'

Bao-yu: 'No.1 meant something quite different. You see, if humans achieve immortality, there are two ways in which they can depart from this world: either they go in the flesh, in their earthly form, or they may discard their bodies, and their etheric body is then magically transported to another realm. Oh, Aroma, please help me! Tell Nightingale to come!'

Aroma: 'You'll have to wait till I've had a chance to explain all this to her properly. Then, if she agrees to come, well and good. If not, I can see I shall have to try again and have another long talk with her, and even after that, supposing she does come, she probably won't be prepared to say much to you. If you want my advice, you should at least wait till tomorrow. In the morning when Mrs Bao goes in to see Her Old Ladyship I'll have a word with Nightingale. We might get somewhere that way. I'll come back as soon as I've spoken to her and tell you how it went.'

Bao-yu: 'I suppose you're right. But you don't know how impatient I feel.'

At this point, Musk appeared:

'Mrs Bao says, it's already well past midnight, and will you go in to bed now, Mr Bao. Aroma must have got carried away chatting to you, and forgotten the time...

'Goodness, it *is* late!' exclaimed Aroma. 'Time to go to sleep. If there's anything else, it can wait till the morning.'

Bao-yu rose reluctantly to go in to the bedroom, whispering in Aroma's ear as he passed by:

'Be sure not to forget tomorrow, whatever you do!'

'Of course I won't!' said Aroma with a smile.

'You two at it again!' said Musk, touching her cheek at Aroma in a saucy fashion. Then, to Bao-ya: 'Why don't you just go straight to Mrs Bao and tell her that you'd like to sleep with Aroma? Then the two of you can carry on "talking" till dawn. None of us will interfere, you needn't worry.'

Bao-yu raised his hand:

'That is quite uncalled for, Musk!'

'Little hussy!' said Aroma heatedly. 'Always having your little dig! You'd better look out! One of these days I'll rip that nasty little tongue of yours out of your mouth for good!' Turning to Bao-yu, she continued:

'Now see what you've done! This is all your fault. Keeping me up talking like this till one o'clock in the

morning...'

She escorted him into his room and then went her separate way to bed.

Bao-yu was unable to sleep that night, and in the morning was still preoccupied with the same gloomy thoughts.

The new day began with an announcement from outside:

'The Master's family and friends have expressed a wish to bold a theatre-party to welcome him home. The Master however is insistent that plays would be inappropriate on this occasion; instead he will give a simple party at home, to which all family and friends are invited. The date has been set fot the day after tomorrow. This is the preliminary announcement.'

To learn who was invited, please read the next chapter.

CHAPTER 105

The Embroidered Jackets raid
Ning-guo House
And Censor Li impeaches
the Prefrct of Ping-an

The day of the reception arrived. Jia Zheng was busily entertaining his guests in the Hall of Exalted Felicity, when Lai Da the steward hurried in to report that a Commissioner Zhao was outside, with a detachment of the Embroidered Jackets, the Imperial secret police:

'He says he is making a social call, and when I asked for his visiting card he told me there was no need for any such formality, as he was on the best of terms with you, sir. Then he got down from his carriage and started walking straight in. I beg you, sir, to go out with the young masters and receive him at once.'

'I've never had anything to do with this Zhao,' mused Jia Zheng. 'I wonder what can have brought him here? And at such an inconvenient hour. I can hardly abandon my guests to entertain him; and yet if I do not invite him in it will seem uncivil...'

He stood there thinking the matter over to himself, and Jia Lian urged him to hurry: 'If you wait much longer, Uncle, they will be upon us.'

Even as he said these words, a servant entered to announce that Commissioner Zhao had indeed already passed through the inner gate, and Jia Zheng hurried out into the courtyard to receive him. Zhao soon came into sight, smiling but silent, and walked straight on and up into the hall. He was followed by five or six of his aides, some of whom were known to Jia Zheng, but although Jia Zheng greeted them, none of them said a word in reply. Jia Zheng could only follow them helplessly back into the hall and ask them to be seated. Some of the guests were acquainted with Zhao, but he passed them by with his head in the air and ignored everyone except Jia Zheng, whom he eventually took by the hand and engaged in vague small-talk, smiling inscrutably all the while. The guests scented trouble in the air, and either sneaked out into the private apartments at the back of the mansion, or stood stock-still where they were, in an attitude of apprehensive respect.

J ia Zheng managed to maintain an anxious smile, and was about to attempt a response to one of Zhao's pleasantries when a flustered servant entered the hall and announced:

'His Highness the Prince of Xi-ping!'

Jia Zheng hurried out once again, to find the prince already entering the courtyard. Commissioner Zhao moved smartly forward ahead of Jia Zheng to salute the prince, and then gave his own aides their orders:

‘His Royal Highness has now arrived; take your men and post yourselves at the front and rear gates of the mansion.

Zhao’s aides went off to do his bidding, while Jia Zheng and the other menfolk, filled with foreboding by this sinister turn of events, fell to their knees and kowtowed before the Prince of Xi-ping. The prince raised Jia Zheng with both hands and said with a reassuring smile:

‘I would not intrude on you at such a time did I not have special reasons: I am entrusted with an Imperial Edict for your brother, Sir She. But I see that we have come upon you in the midst of a private gathering, and as it would hardly be fitting to proceed while your friends and relatives are still present, I would ask them to leave. Only the members of your own household need remain behind.’

‘A most gracious gesture, I am sure,’ interposed Commissioner Zhao sharply. ‘But His Highness supervising operations at Ning-guo House is, I believe, taking this matter a little more seriously, and has already ordered every gate to be sealed.’

The guests learned from this that both mansions were in some sort of trouble, and began to fear that they themselves were trapped as well. The prince, however, seemed unperturbed, and announced smilingly:

‘Gentlemen, please consider yourselves free to leave. Send for some of my men to escort them out,’ he continued, addressing Zhao, ‘and tell your own officers that these are all guests and are not to be bindered or subjected to any kind of search, but are to be let through without delay.’

As soon as they heard this, the guests vanished like a puff of smoke, leaving only Jia She, Jia Zheng and the immediate family, who stood there trembling and pale with fear. Shortly afterwards, constables swarmed in and stationed themselves at every doorway, thereby denying freedom of movement to masters and servants alike. Zhao turned to the prince, his face positively venomous:

‘Will Your Highness be so good as to read the Edict, so that we can proceed with our task?’

The constables hitched up their robes, rolled up their sleeves, and stood smartly to attention to hear the Edict. The prince began his preamble with great deliberation:

‘I am hereby instructed by His Majesty to proceed with Commissioner Zhao Quan of the Embroidered Jackets and to search, and take a complete inventory of; the property of Jia She.’

Jia She cowered prostrate on the ground as the prince mounted the terrace and, facing south, began the proclamation of the Edict proper:

“‘Hearken! Inasmuch as Our subject Jia She has connived with a provincial official and has used his influence to persecute a defenceless citizen, he has shown himself unworthy of Our favour, has disgraced his ancestors, and is to be deprived of his hereditary rank. By Imperial Decree.”‘

‘Arrest him!’ barked Zhao. ‘Take the others away and put them under close guard!’

This referred to the other Jia menfolk present - Jia Zheng, Jia Lian, Cousin Zhen, Jia Rong, Jia Qiang, Jia Zhi and Jia Lan. Bao-yu had somehow managed to slip out to Grandmother Jia’s apartment earlier, on the pretext of some indisposition or other, while Jia Huan hardly ever put in an appearance at such social gatherings.

Zhao also told his aides to issue the junior officers and constables with their orders at once: they were to divide up and search the mansion room by room, taking a detailed inventory as they went along. These orders, and the brisk matter-of-fact efficiency with which they were delivered, had a devastating impact on the morale of the Jia family, young and old alike. They looked at one another in terror as they were led away, while Zhao’s constables and personal lackeys began rubbing their hands in gleeful anticipation.

‘I understand,’ said the Prince of Xi-ping, ‘that Sir Zheng and Sir She maintain separate establishments. Since the Edict only empowers us to search Sir She’s property, the other apartments should be locked and sealed, until such time as I have received further instructions from His Majesty.’

Zhao rose to his feet.

‘Your Highness, I should inform you that in point of fact Jia She and Jia Zheng do *not* maintain separate establishments. On the contrary, I am given to understand that the affairs of both branches of Rong-guo Rouse

are managed by one person, Jia Lian, who is the son of Sir She and the nephew of Sir Zheng. It is therefore imperative that we search the entire mansion.'

The prince was silent, and Zhao continued:

'In view of this, I shall personally direct the search of the residences of both Jia She and Jia Lian.'

'There is no hurry,' said the prince. 'Send word to the inner apartments first, and give the ladies time to withdraw. A few minutes' delay is neither here nor there.'

But even as he was speaking, Zhao's men, who had already led away the Jia menfolk, were dividing up into search parties and had begun their work, each taking one of the Jia servants to act as guide.

'Let there be no rowdy behaviour now!' cried the prince. 'I shall be along presently to supervise the proceedings myself.'

He rose to his feet in a dignified manner, and addressed his own attendants:

'Not one of you is to move. Wait here, and later we shall inspect the inventory together.'

Almost immediately one of Zhao's men returned from the search and knelt before him:

'Your Highness, restricted garments and skirts for palace use, and many other prohibited items, have been found in the inner apartments. I have given orders that these are not to be moved, pending Your Highness's instructions.'

Presently another search party returned and pressed before the prince:

'Two chests of property deeds found in the eastern side-compound, and one chest of promissory notes - all bearing illegal rates of interest?.'

'Usurers!' hissed Zhao. 'They deserve to lose everything. Take a seat, Your Highness, and allow me to order the immediate confiscation of the entire contents of the mansion. We can report to the throne for the necessary authorization afterwards.'

At that moment an aide-dc-camp came in to speak to the prince:

'The soldiers at the gate have sent word that the Prince of Bei-jing is here, as the special emissary of His Majesty, and will deliver a second Edict. You are requested to go out and receive him.'

Zhao welcomed this news.

'It was just my luck,' he thought to himself; 'to have been lumbered with this first prince! Now he's being replaced, and I should be able to get down to business!'

He went out to the front courtyard, to find the Prince of Bei-jing already facing south, and delivering the new Edict.

'"For the Edification of Zhao Quan, Commissioner of the Embroidered Jackets. Hearken! The men under Zhao's command are to arrest no one, with the exception of Jia She, who is to be held for questioning. The Prince of Xi-ping will supervise all other aspects of the investigation according to Our Instructions."'

The Prince of Xi-ping was delighted. He sat down with the Prince of Bei-jing, and told Zhao to take Jia She with him and return to his yamen. The search parties, having learned of the arrival of the new prince, had all congregated once more in the courtyard. They were most disappointed to hear that Zhao was being removed from the scene, and stood around, disconsolately waiting for their new orders. The Prince of Bei-jing selected two of the more honest-looking officers and a dozen or so of the older constables to stay behind, and dismissed all the others.

'I was just beginning to get extremely annoyed with old Zhao,' said the Prince of Xi-ping. 'You arrived with that second Edict in the nick of time. If you'd been much later, I'm afraid it would have gone badly for the Jias.'

'I heard at court,' replied the Prince of Bei-jing, 'that you had been entrusted with the original Edict, and that the investigation was in your hands, and I must say I was greatly relieved. I knew I could depend on you to see that things did not get out of hand. But I hadn't bargained on that old rogue Zhao. Tell me, where are Sir Zheng and young Bao-yu? I do hope these men have not been creating too much havoc.'

‘Jia Zheng and the other gentlemen are being held under guard in the servants’ quarters,’ he was informed by the officers. ‘The men have turned the entire house upside-down in the course of their search.’

The Prince of Bei-jing turned to one of them:

‘Bring Sir Zheng here at once. I wish to speak to him.’

Jia Zheng was brought in, and fell to his knees, tearfully pleading for mercy. The Prince of Bei-jing stood up, took him by both hands and said:

‘My friend, set your mind at rest.’

When the prince went on to inform him of the new Edict, Jia Zheng wept with emotion, and faced in a northerly direction to kowtow his thanks to the throne. Then he came forward again to receive any further instructions. It was the Prince of Xi-ping who continued:

‘My friend, when Commissioner Zhao was here just now, his constables reported having found prohibited items of clothing, and promissory notes bearing excessive rates of interest. It will be hard to gloss all this over. The clothes were no doubt intended for Her Grace’s use - that I can state quite plausibly in my report. But these promissory notes - what are we to say about *them?* I think you, Zheng, had better go now with one of the officers and give him a complete account of all Sir She’s property. It is essential that you conceal nothing, or you will only make things worse for yourself.’

‘How could I dare to conceal anything!’ replied Jia Zheng. ‘But I beg to inform Your Highness that our family estate has never been formally divided between my brother and myself; individually we own only whatever we happen to have in our apartments.’

‘Very well,’ said the princes. ‘Proceed on that basis, and declare whatever is in Sir She’s compound.’

The officers were instructed to execute this task in an orderly and civilized fashion, and departed with Jia Zheng.

*

Let us return to Grandmother Jia’s apartments, where the ladies had been holding a party of their own that day. Bao-yu had come to join them, and Lady Wang asked him if he ought not to be with the men, for fear of angering his father. Xi-feng was also present, despite her illness, and she replied somewhat croakily on Bao-yu’s behalf:

‘I’m sure Bao-yu wasn’t afraid of the company, Aunt Wang, and I’m sure he wasn’t shirking his responsibilities. He just thought there were plenty of men to wait on the guests outside, and that he would be better employed helping us here - which is reasonable enough. If Uncle Zheng needs an extra hand, you can always send Bao-yu over later.’

Grandmother Jia laughed:

‘Fengie may be ill, but she still has a tongue in her head!’

The party was warming up and the conversation becoming quite merry, when suddenly one of Lady Xing’s maidservants came running in, screeching:

‘Your Old Ladyship! Your Ladyships! The most terr.... terrible thing has happened! Hundreds of bandits in big boots and hats have broken into the house, turned all the trunks and boxes upside down and started stealing our things!’

The ladies stared at her dumbfounded. Next, Patience hurried into the room, her hair dishevelled, dragging Qiao-jie by the hand and sobbing hysterically:

‘Lord have mercy on us! I was having my meal with Qiao-jie when Brightie was brought in, his hands tied behind his back. “Hurry, miss,” he told me, “go inside and tell Their Ladyships to hide. The prince is on his way in to search the house!” I nearly died of fright. I went into our apartment to rescue a few of the more important things, and ran into a gang of ruffians who pushed me Out of their way. You’d better hurry and collect together all the clothes and things you’ll need before it’s too late.’

Lady Xing and Lady Wang were utterly flabbergasted; Xi-feng listened wide-eyed as Patience told her tale, and then slumped onto the floor with her head thrown back; Grandmother Jia burst into floods of tears before Patience had even finished, and was too distraught to utter a word. The whole room was in this state of total disarray, and the servants were falling over each other in their panic, when suddenly more cries were heard from outside:

'Ladies to withdraw! His Highness the Prince is approaching!'

Bao-chai and Bao-yu stood watching helplessly, as the maids and old nannies scrambled in every direction. The next they knew, Jia Lian came running in, panting:

'All is well! The prince has saved the day!'

They wanted to ask him what had happened, but Jia Lian was himself too infected by the general hysteria to be of any service as an informant. First he caught sight of Xi-feng lying unconscious on the floor, and cried out in alarm; then he saw that Grandmother Jia had also fainted from shock, and feared the worst for her. Patience succeeded in bringing Xi-feng round, and with the help of one of the maids helped her up onto her feet; while Grandmother Jia, when she finally regained consciousness, lay down sobbing on the kang, struggling for breath, as though she might faint again at any moment. Li Wan did her best to comfort her, and Jia Lian himself was at last sufficiently composed to tell them of the events that had taken place, and of the kindness shown them by the two princes - though he withheld the news of Jia She's arrest, which he was afraid might prove too great a shock for Grandmother Jia and Lady Xing. He then went to examine the condition of his own apartment, and found chests and cupboards broken open and ransacked. There was almost nothing left. He stared around him aghast, and tears sprang to his eyes. He heard his name called outside, and went out to find Jia Zheng with the two princes and the officer taking the inventory. The items were being called Out one by one:

One Longevity Buddha in aloeswood
One Goddess of Mercy, ditto
One Buddha plinth
Rosary-beads in aloeswood, two strings
Golden Buddhas, one set
    Nine gold-plated bronze mirrors
    Jade Buddhas, three
    Longevity and the Eight Immortals, a set of jade figurines
Four Ru-yi sceptres - two in gold and jade, two in aloeswood
Antique porcelain vases and jars, seventeen
    Fourteen chests containing antique *objets* d'art and mounted scrolls
One large jade jar
    Two small ditto
    Large jade circular dishes, two pairs
    Two large glass folding-screens
    Two small kang screens
    Four large dishes in glass
        Four jade dishes
        Two agate ditto
        Four large dishes in solid gold
    Gold bowls, six pairs
    Eight howls with pattern in gold inlay
Gold spoons, forty

Large silver howls, sixty
Silver dishes, sixty
Ivory chopsticks with triple gold inlay, four bundles
Gold-plated jugs with handles, twelve
Small spittoons, three pairs
Two saucers
Silver cups and saucers, one hundred and sixty
Black fox-furs, eighteen
Sables, fifty-six
Russet fox-furs, forty-four
White ditto, forty-four
Mongolian lynx-skins, twelve
Partly tailored Yunnan fox-skins, twenty-five
Sea-otter skins, twenty-six
Seal-skins, three
Tiger-skins, six
Brown-and-black striped fox-furs, three
Otter-skins, twenty-eight
Red astrakhan-skins, forty
Black astrakhan-skins sixty-three
Partly tailored musquash-skins, twenty
Mongolian suslik, twenty-four squares
‘Swansdown’ velvet, four rolls
Grey squirrel-skins, two hundred and sixty-three
Japanese damask silk, thirty-two lengths
Imported worsted, thirty lengths
Serge, thirty-three lengths
Velveteen, forty lengths
Plain satin, one hundred and thirty bolts
Gauze silk, one hundred and eighty bolts
Corded silk-crepe, thirty-two bolts
Bombasine and camlets, twenty-two rolls each
Tibetan yak’s serge, thirty bolts
Dragon-robe satin, eighteen bolts
Cottons, assorted colours, thirty bundles
Sundry fur garments, one hundred and thirty-two
Various garments, padded, lined, unlined, gauze and silk - three hundred and forty
Nine pairs of belt-buckles
Items in brass and pewter, over five hundred
Clocks and watches, eighteen
Court chaplets, nine strings of one hundred and eight bands
Pearls, thirteen strings
Gold head-dresses, complete with jewels and precious stones, one hundred and twenty-three
Cushion covers and arm-rest covers in Imperial **yellow** satin, three sets
Palace dresses and skirts, eight sets
Two girdles in ‘mutton4at’ white jade

Yellow satin, twelve bolts
Substandard silver, seven thousand taels
Pure gold, one hundred and fifty-two taels
Copper cash, seven thousand five hundred strings

All the furniture and properties bestowed by Imperial favour on the Rong-guo branch of the family had been itemized in a similar fashion, while property deeds and bonds for household servants had been put into separate covers and sealed.

Jia Lian followed this recital in detail, and was greatly puzzled to hear no mention of any of his own belongings. Presently one of the princes put an end to his bewilderment by asking Jia Zheng:

'Among the items confiscated earlier, there were promissory notes bearing exorbitant rates of interest - who is responsible for these? You must tell the truth, Zheng.'

Jia Zheng knelt, kowtowed and said:

'I have, alas, been insufficiently diligent in supervising my household. I was completely unaware of these activities. My nephew Jia Lian can doubtless answer your questions.'

Jia Lian hurried forward and fell to his knees.

'Since the chest containing these documents was found in my apartment, how dare I disclaim knowledge of them? I can only beg Your Highnesses' mercy. My uncle was quite unaware of their existence.'

'Your father has already been arrested,' said the princes to Jia Lian. 'This offence can be dealt with at the same time as his. We commend you for having made a clean breast of it.' They turned to their men: 'Jia Lian must be detained. The others may be released, but are to be kept within the confines of the mansion.' Finally they addressed Jia Zheng: 'You, Zheng, must be more circumspect in future. Stay here and await His Majesty's final Edict. We will now return to make our report to the throne, and in the meantime will leave guards here to keep watch over the house.'

They climbed into their princely sedans and were carried Out of the mansion. Jia Zheng escorted them as far as the inner gate, where he knelt to see them off, and the Prince of Bei-jing stretched out a hand towards him as he passed, urging him to set his mind at ease. There was genuine concern written on the prince's face.

After their departure Jia Zheng managed to compose himself somewhat, though he was still suffering from a deep sense of shock. When Jia Lian came and asked him to call on Grandmother Jia, informing him that she was indisposed, he roused himself at once and went in. At every doorway he encountered frantic maids and serving-women, all wondering what turn events would take next. Too preoccupied to stop and question them, he hurried on to Grandmother Jia's apartment, and arrived to find Lady Wang, Bao-yu and the others gathered around Grandmother Jia, their faces wet with tears; there was silence in the room, broken only by the occasional fit of convulsive wailing from Lady Xing. The appearance of Jia Zheng brought cries of 'Heaven be praised!' and they hastened to reassure the old lady:

'The Master is safe and sound! He's here with us! Please don't fret any more, Grannie!'

Grandmother Jia gave a faint little gasp and opened her eyes a slit:

'Oh my son! I thought I'd never see you again!'

As she spoke, she burst out sobbing, and everyone in the room immediately followed suit. Jia Zheng was afraid that all this emotion might injure the old lady's health and checked his own tears:

'Please calm yourself, Mother. I cannot deny the gravity of what has happened. But thanks to the Emperor's generosity and the gracious favour of the two princes, we have been treated with great compassion. Brother She has only been taken for questioning, and when his case has been investigated I am sure His Majesty will deal with him leniently also. And so far, not a thing has been removed from the house.'

When Grandmother Jia learned that her elder son had been taken away, she broke down again, and it was a while before Jia Zheng could finally calm her spirits.

The first person to venture out of the room was Lady Xing. She went to inspect her own apartment, and found all the doors sealed with strips of paper and padlocked, and her maids and serving-women held prisoner inside. There was nowhere for her to take refuge, and she let out a great howl of despair. Finally she made her way to Xi-feng's apartment. Xi-feng's side-rooms were sealed in a similar fashion, but the door leading into the main hall was still open, and from inside she could hear the sound of sobbing. She went in, and saw Xi-feng lying on her couch with eyes closed, her face ashen-pale; Patience stood by her side, quietly weeping. Lady Xing thought Xi-feng must be already dead and broke down again. Patience came up to her:

'Please, Your Ladyship, don't cry! We carried Mrs Lian back and she looked as good as dead. She had a sleep and then she woke up again and started crying. Now she's more settled. Please try to be calm, Your Ladyship. How is Her Old Ladyship taking it?'

Lady Xing did not answer her question, but returned to Grandmother Jia's apartment. There she was surrounded by Jia Zheng's family. She reflected on her wretched fate: her husband and son were under arrest, her daughter-in-law was at death's door, her newly married daughter was suffering maltreatment, and now she herself had nowhere to turn. Her whole world seemed to be collapsing around her. The others took pity on her distress and did what they could to comfort her; Li Wan sent a servant to prepare temporary accommodation while Lady Wang deputed some of her own maids and serving-women to wait on her.

Jia Zheng meanwhile had returned to his outer study and was sitting there, stroking his beard and nervously rubbing his hands together, waiting in a state of great trepidation for the outcome of the princes' report to the throne. He heard one of the guards shouting outside:

'Which part of the house do you belong to, for goodness' sake? Since you've turned up here, we'll have to enter you in our book. Bind him and hand him over to the Jackets.'

Jia Zheng went out to the gate and found that the man in question was Big Jiao, the 'trusty old retainer' from Ning-guo House.

'What the devil brings you here?' he asked.

Stomping furiously on the ground and calling heaven to be his witness, Big Jiao cried:

'Hadn't I warned these good-for-naught masters time after time -and they always said I was agin them! But you, sir, *you* know the wounds I had at my master's side! And now look what we've come to! Mr Zhen and Master Rong both put in chains by some prince or other; the ladies manhandled and locked up in an empty room by some men from the whatsit guards; the slaves all penned up together, sir, like the worthless pigs that they are! Everything taken out for inventory and pushed to one side, lovely old furniture broken up, china smashed to smithereens ... And now they want to get their hands on me! In my more than four score years I've tied men aplenty for my master: but let 'em do it to me - never! I gave 'em the slip at first and said I was from Rong-guo House; but they wouldn't believe it and dragged me in. And now I find things are just as bad here. Nothing left worth living for. Whole place gone to the dogs. Well, I'm damned if I'll knuckle under now. I might as well go down fighting!'

He charged head-first at the guards, who, Out of respect for his age, and not wishing to contravene the princes' orders, handled him with restraint.

'Calm down, old man. We're here to carry out an Imperial Edict. Now just take it easy and wait to see what His Majesty commands.'

Throughout this Jia Zheng said nothing, though he was cut to the quick by the old man's words.

'So it has come to this!' he finally exclaimed to himsel£ 'We are finished! I never thought we should be brought so low!'

He returned to his study and a little later was still sitting there, anxiously awaiting news from the Palace, when he heard Xue Ke come running into the courtyard and call out breathlessly:

'I got through by the skin of my teeth! Where's Uncle Zheng?'

Jia Zheng stepped out to greet him:

‘I am so glad you were able to reach us. How did you persuade them to let you in?’

‘I just begged and begged for all I was worth, and promised them money, and in the end they let me pass.’

Jia Zheng told him of the raid and asked him to try to find out on their behalf what was going on:

‘We can’t communicate with our friends and relatives. It would be too dangerous. You are the very person to carry word through for us.’

‘I had heard of the charges brought against Ning-guo House,’ said Xue Ke, ‘but I had no idea things were so bad on this side too.’

‘But what *are* the charges?’ asked Jia Zheng.

‘Earlier today,’ replied Xue Ke, ‘I was at the Board of Punishments on business of my own. I was enquiring about Cousin Pan’s sentence, but while I was there I happened to hear of the indictments brought by two censors against Cousin Zhen. One was for corrupting the sons of noble families, encouraging them to gamble and that sort of thing. That was the lesser of the charges: the other was for forcefully taking as a concubine the fiancée of an innocent man; when she resisted, or so the indictment reads, he subjected her to physical violence and drove her to her death. To corroborate the charges, the censor concerned has arrested a servant of ours named Bao Er and has also brought as witness a certain Mr Zhang. Even the Chief Censorate may be in trouble, as this fellow Zhang originally appealed to them some time ago and had his appeal quashed.’

Jia Zheng stamped his foot before Xue Ke had finished speaking.

‘What have things come to! This is truly the end!’

He sighed, and his cheeks were wet with tears. Xue Ke tried to console him, and then went Out again to gather more news.

‘Things look bad,’ he reported later that day. ‘At the Board of Punishments, I could discover nothing about the two princes and their report to the throne. But I did learn something else. Early this morning a censor named Li presented an impeachment against the magistrate of Ping-an, accusing him of toadying to a metropolitan official, of pandering to his superiors and of Oppressing the common people - together with a whole string of serious related offences.’

‘What has that to do with us?’ replied Jia Zheng somewhat impatiently. ‘What about our own people?’

‘The two cases are connected,’ said Xue Ke. ‘The metropolitan official referred to in Censor Li’s impeachment is in fact Uncle She: which means that he is implicated in a miscarriage of justice - which is a serious offence. His friends at court want to keep their hands clean if they possibly can, and there is no one even willing to keep us informed. It’s the same with the guests who fled from the party just now - they have either gone home, or found some other hiding place in which to lie low until the storm blows over. A few members of the clan are even publicly asking who will be the lucky one to get the title now that the family has been disgraced. They all have an eye on it ...’

Jia Zheng stamped his foot and interrupted him again:

‘This is all the consequence of my elder brother’s folly! And of the disgraceful ways into which Ning-guo House had fallen! But enough of this. Who knows if Lady Jia and Lian’s wife are even still alive! You had best return and continue your enquiries, while I go and see how Lady Jia is. If you have any news, bring it as quickly as you can.’

As they were speaking, a confused cry was heard from within:

‘Her Old Ladyship is sinking!’

Jia Zheng hurried away in great alarm. To learn if she lived, you must turn to the next chapter.

CHAPTER 106

Wang Xi-feng feels remorse for the consequences
of her past misdeeds
And Grandmother Jia prays for the family's deliverance
from further calamity'

Jia Zheng hurried straight in to Grandmother Jia's apartment. The shock of the day's events had finally taken its toll, and she was unconscious again and breathing fitfully. Lady Wang, with the help of Faithful and the other maids, eventually brought her round. They persuaded her to swallow one of her combined dispersant and sedative boluses, which brought some slight relief. But she remained tearful and distraught. Jia Zheng stood by her side and tried to comfort her and rally her spirits:

'It is Brother She and I who have brought this misfortune on the family and caused you all this distress, Mother. Please try to take heart a little. We will do our utmost to set things to rights. If you should suffer in any way, our burden of guilt will be unbearable!'

'I am over eighty now,' replied the old lady, 'and ever since the day I came here as a girl and was married to your father, I have led a sheltered life. I have been blessed and protected by the family ancestors. I've never even heard of such terrible goings-on as these. I am too old for it all. I couldn't bear to see you punished. I'd rather die, and be spared the ordeal.'

She burst into tears once again, and Jia Zheng grew more and more agitated about her condition. Suddenly a voice was heard outside calling:

'News from court for the Master!'

Jia Zheng hurried out. The Prince of Bei-jing's aide-de-camp was waiting for him in the main reception hall, and greeted him with the words:

'Excellent news, sir!'

Jia Zheng thanked the aide for coming and begged him to be seated.

'What are my instructions from His Highness?' he asked.

'My master and His Highness the Prince of Xi-ping presented a joint report to His Majesty, and spoke at some length on your behalf, sir, stressing your penitence and your great appreciation of the clemency shown to you by the throne. His Majesty was most sympathetic, and mindful of the recent demise of Her Grace, he has resolved not to punish you, but instead to restore you to your former post as Under-Secretary at the Board of Works. Of the family property held under restraint, only that portion belonging to Sir She is to be confiscated. The rest will all be returned to you. His Majesty urges you to resume your official duties with diligence.

'The matter of the promissory notes will be investigated personally by my master. Any such notes referring to loans made at usurious rates of interest will be confiscated outright according to the relevant statute; notes negotiated at permissible rates, together with title-deeds of houses and land, will all be returned. Jia Lian is to be deprived of his position and rank, but otherwise will be exempted from further punishment and released.'

Jia Zheng rose from his seat and kowtowed in the appropriate direction for this act of Imperial clemency. He also bowed to the aide to express his profound gratitude for the prince's intervention on his behalf.

'Be so good as to convey my thanks to His Highness. Tomorrow I shall attend court in order to express my gratitude to His Majesty in person, and shall also present myself at His Highness's palace to make my kowtow.'

The prince's aide took his leave. Shortly afterwards a court official arrived to proclaim the Edict, followed by the officers entrusted with its execution, who supervised the proceedings scrupulously, confiscating only what had been specified, and restoring everything else to its owner. Jia Lian was released, while Jia She's domestic staff, men and women alike, were all taken away into public service.

Jia Lian's position was not to be envied. Some of the promissory notes and documents were returned, and none of his other property had been officially confiscated, but his apartment had been ransacked and nothing but the bare furniture had been left in place. His initial relief at being set free and escaping the punishment he feared soon gave way to a profound sense of loss, when he beheld his own and Xi-feng's possessions of a lifetime - altogether about sixty thousand taels' worth - gone in a morning's work. His father's imprisonment, Xi-feng's critical state of health: the strain was almost more than he could bear. And now he had to face Jia Zheng, who summoned him and berated him, barely suppressing a sob:

'I have, alas, been too busy of late with my official duties, and have paid insufficient attention to family matters. I thought I could rely on you and your wife: I can hardly remonstrate with your father for his misconduct; but this usury that has come to light - who in heaven's name is responsible for that? Families like ours simply do not dabble in such things. The documents have been confiscated, and both principal and interest are forfeit: but it's not the money, it's the appalling blow this will deal to our reputation!'

Jia Lian fell to his knees:

'In managing our family's affairs, Uncle, I have never acted with a view to private gain. All the accounts have been kept by the stewards- Lai Da, Wu Xin-deng, Dai Liang and the others. Please summon them and hear the truth from their lips. These past few years, our expenditure has far exceeded our income, and there have been deficits in the accounts that I have simply been unable to make good, despite the numerous unsecured debts I have had to negotiate. Aunt Wang will be able to tell you all about it. As for the money loaned out, even I have no idea where that has come from. You'd better ask Zhou Rui and Brightie.'

'So, you are telling me you don't even know what goes on in your own apartment, let alone the rest of the household! I shall not pursue this matter any further with you at present. Consider yourself extremely lucky to have been let off so lightly. Now you'd better stir yourself and find out what's happening to your father and Cousin Zhen.'

Jia Lian felt very hard done by, but swallowed his tears and departed in obedience to his uncle's instructions.

Left alone, Jia Zheng ruminated on the family's misfortunes, heaving many a heartfelt sigh:

'It was in vain that my grandfather and my great-uncle served the throne so loyally, winning the family great honour and two hereditary titles. Now both our houses have been disgraced, both titles have been stripped from us. And if I look further ahead, I can see no respite, no rising star in the younger generation capable of stemming this tide of degeneration! Great Heaven! That our noble line should have come to this! Thanks to an act of exceptional clemency on His Majesty's part, *I* have been spared, and *my* property has been restored. But both households must now look to me for their daily sustenance, and how can I hope to support them all? This latest revelation of Lian's is another grievous blow; not only have we no reserves, we are seriously in debt. We have evidently been living under false pretences for years! And I have only my own stupidity to blame! How can I have been so blind? If only my eldest son were still alive! In Zhu I might at least have had some support. But Bao-yu, for all that he is my son, and now a grown man, can offer me no help whatsoever.'

Throughout this silent soliloquy Jia Zheng had been weeping despite himself, and the collar of his gown was damp with tears.

'As for Mother - so far from supporting her in her old age, we have nearly driven her to her death. Whom can I blame for this calamitous state of affairs but myself?'

He was brooding like this, sunk in the deepest gloom and self-reproach, when a servant entered to announce the arrival of various friends and relations. Jia Zheng received them, thanking them each individually for their concern.

'These misfortunes of ours,' he said to them, by way of apology, 'are the direct consequence of my own failure to inculcate proper standards in the younger generation.'

'We beg to differ,' replied one of them. 'We have long considered Sir She's conduct questionable. And Mr Zhen has been even more arrogant and dissolute in his ways. Now their misdemeanours have come to light and

have brought them public censure. The fault lies entirely with them. It is most regrettable that their misdeeds should have rebounded on you, sir.'

'I have known many cases of similar conduct,' commented another, 'but none of them involved an indictment like this. Mr Zhen must have somehow caused offence . .'

'The intervention of the censor in this case can be easily explained,' countered another. 'It appears that one of your own household servants and some of his less respectable friends have been spreading unpleasant rumours, and that these reached the censor's ears. He wished to substantiate them before proceeding any further, and persuaded this same servant of yours to go along and give information. Knowing how generously you treat your staff, I find it hard to believe that such a thing could have happened.'

'That's the way with servants,' remarked another. 'They take advantage of their masters' generosity. Since we are among friends here, I think I may be permitted to speak my mind. I know what an incorruptible man you are, sir; but while you were in Kiangsi, your reputation was somehow tarnished. That was your servants' doing. You will have to be more cautious in future. Although you have escaped with your own property intact this time, if His Majesty should ever have occasion to question your integrity again, it might be considerably less pleasant for you.'

Jia Zheng seemed greatly perturbed by this.

'What do you mean? In what way was my reputation tarnished?'

'There is of course no shred of material evidence,' came the reply, 'but we have heard others say that during your time as Grain Intendant you instructed your servants to practise extortion.'

'As Heaven is my witness,' exclaimed Jia Zheng, 'no such thought even entered my head! My men were cheating and bullying behind my back. Any more of this sort of gossip and I shall be finished!'

'It's no use fretting about the past,' commented one of the company. 'But you should examine your present staff carefully. Weed out any refractory elements among them and deal with them severely.'

At that moment one of the janitors entered the room:

'Sir She's son-in-law, Mr Sun, has sent a servant with a message, sir. His master is too busy to come in person. This man is instructed to inform you that the Suns are expecting you to discharge Sir She's debts.'

Jia Zheng looked gloomy and harassed, and gave a perfunctory acknowledgement. His friends laughed contemptuously:

'This Mr Sun has a bad reputation; and it certainly seems well founded. When his father-in-law has his home raided and his property confiscated, so far from offering assistance, he comes hounding him for money. It's preposterous!'

'Let's not talk of him,' replied Jia Zheng. 'That whole match was a blunder on my elder brother's part. I should have thought my poor niece had suffered enough at this young man's hands, without his having to torment me as well.'

As he was speaking, Xue Ke appeared.

'I have learned,' he reported to Jia Zheng, 'that Commissioner Zhao is insisting on pursuing every detail of the indictment. I am afraid that Uncle She and Cousin Zhen will have a hard time of it.'

'You must seek the prince's help in this matter,' Jia Zheng's friends advised him. 'Without his intervention, you may all be ruined.'

Jia Zheng thanked his visitors for their advice, which he said he would be sure to follow, and they all took their leave.

It was already lighting-up time, and Jia Zheng went to pay his evening respects to Grandmother Jia, who seemed slightly recovered. He returned to his apartment, and sat once more silently brooding over Jia Lian and Xi-feng's reckless behaviour. Their usury, now that it had come to light, would damage the whole family and he blamed them bitterly for it. But he reflected also that Xi-feng was gravely ill, and had lost everything in the raid, which was sure to have been a great additional blow to her, and decided not to criticize her for the time

being, but to contain his anger and say nothing. The rest of that night passed without further event.
Early next morning Jia Zheng went to the Palace to give thanks for the Emperor's clemency, and afterwards to the palaces of the Prince of Bei-jing and the Prince of Xi-ping, where he kowtowed to them and begged them to intervene on behalf of Jia She and Cousin Zhen. The princes spoke reassuringly in reply. Jia Zheng went on to visit other friends and colleagues to enlist their support.

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Our narrative turns to Jia Lian. He ascertained, from his enquiries in official quarters, that his father and Cousin Zhen were indeed facing a serious charge; and seeing that there was nothing he could do to help, returned despondently home. In his apartment, Patience sat weeping and watching by Xi-feng's bedside, while Autumn could be heard in the side-room grumbling to herself. When Jia Lian came close to Xi-feng and saw how feeble she was, he could not bring himself to vent his resentment on her. Patience said to him with tears in her eyes:
'Everything's gone! We'll never get any of it back. And look at Mrs Lian, sir. You must send for a doctor.'
'Psh!' spat Lian bitterly. *'I'm* only alive by the skin of my teeth; do you expect me to bother on her behalf?'
These words did not escape Xi-feng, and she opened her eyes and looked at Jia Lian in silence. Tears began to trickle down her cheeks. Jia Lian walked out of the room, and Xi-feng said to Patience:
'You must be more realistic! Now things have come to this, you must put me out of your mind. I only wish I could die today and have done with it! If I still mean anything to you, then the one thing I beg of you is to look after little Qiao-jie when I'm gone. Do that for me, and my soul will thank yours in the next world.'
Patience burst into tears.
'Come on,' said Xi-feng, 'you're no fool! They may not have come here and said so to my face, but I know they blame me for what's happened. It's not true. It was others outside who started it. But I admit I was foolish to lend money and create trouble for myself. All my plans and schemes have come to nothing. My lifetime of striving has been in vain. I'm broken, I'm the lowest of the low. Cousin Zhen took Mr Zhang's fiancée as a concubine and drove her to her death -that's one of the charges, isn't it? Well you know who *he* is, this Mr Zhang, don't you? If You Er-jie's story ever comes to light, Mr Lian will be disgraced. And then how will I ever face the world? I wish I could put an end to everything! But how? I can't bring myself to swallow gold or take poison. And you talk of sending for a doctor! That's not showing your love for me; that's just prolonging my agony!'
Patience grew more and more distraught with every word of Xi-feng's. She felt deeply for her, and resolved to keep a closer watch on her, for fear she might give in to despair.
Luckily Grandmother Jia knew nothing of such harrowing scenes as these. Her own recovery and peace of mind were much aided by the knowledge of Jia Zheng's reinstatement, and by the constant presence of Bao-yu and Bao-chai at her side. She had always had a soft spot for Xi4eng, and now she called Faithful to her and said:
'Take these things of mine over to Mrs Lian. And give Patience some money, so that she can look after her properly. When she is well again, I shall go through the rest of my belongings carefully and see what else I can find for her.'
She also told Lady Wang to see to Lady Xing's needs. The entire Ning-guo estate, including all their property and servants, had been inventoried and impounded. Grandmother Jia gave orders for a carriage to be sent to fetch You-shi and Jia Rong's wife. These two forlorn ladies and Cousin Zhen's two concubines, Lovey and Dove, were the only people left in the once luxurious apartments of Ningguo House. Not a single servant had been spared. Grandmother Jia set aside an apartment for them next to Xi-chun's, designated four old serving-ladies and two maids to wait on them, and ordered that their food and other daily requirements should

be provided from the main kitchens. She also sent them clothes and other necessities, and instructed the accounts office to issue them the same monthly allowance as members of the Rong-guo branch.

But it was out of the question to squeeze money from accounts to cover the expenses (mainly bribes) now incurred in gaol by Jia She, Cousin Zhen and Jia Rong. Xi-feng was penniless and Jia Lian deeply in debt; while Jia Zheng, in his characteristically ineffectual fashion, could only say:

'I have had a word with various friends, and am confident they will do whatever they can.'

Jia Lian could think of no way of raising the money. It was no use turning to Xi-feng's side of the family; the Xues were bankrupt, her elder uncle Wang Zi-teng was dead, and the other Wangs were in no position to help. In the end, in desperation, he secretly sent a man to the Rong-guo country estates with orders to effect an urgent sale of one thousand silver taels' worth of land. This money he used to provide for the family members in prison. When the servants saw their masters reduced to such measures, some decided to take advantage of the situation and themselves invented excuses for borrowing against the rent due from the family's eastern estates. But we anticipate a later part of the story.

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Grandmother Jia saw the family stripped of its hereditary titles; she saw one of her sons and the two other men in gaol awaiting trial; she heard the incessant lamentations of Lady Xing and You-shi, and knew that Xi-feng was gravely ill. Bao-yu and Bao-chai were some comfort to her, but they could not relieve her of the sorrow and grief that constantly gnawed at her heart. One day towards evening, she sent Bao-yu back to his apartment, and struggling up unaided from her couch instructed Faithful and the other maids to go round the mansion and light incense before every statue of the Buddha. Finally she gave orders for a large bushel-shaped bundle of joss-sticks to he lit in the open, and leaning on her stick walked out into her courtyard. Amber knew that she must be intending to pray, and placed a **crimson** felt hassock for her to kneel upon. The old lady made her offering of incense, knelt and kowtowed several times. She chanted the name of Buddha, and with tears in her eyes began to pray:

'Almighty Lord Buddha! I your humble servant, born into the family of Shi, and married into the house of Jia, earnestly beseech you to show your compassion. For many generations we have done no wrong, we have not trodden in the ways of violence or arrogance. I have done my humble and inadequate best to stay m the paths of righteousness, to support my husband and to assist my sons. But the younger generation have acted with wanton recklessness, they have incurred the wrath of providence, and now our home has been raided and our property taken from us. My son and two of the younger men are held in prison and must expect the worst. The blame for all of these misfortunes must rest on my shoulders, for having failed to teach the younger generation the true principles of conduct. Now I kowtow and beg Almighty Heaven to protect us. May those in prison see their sorrow turned to joy, may the ailing swiftly recover their health. May I alone be permitted to carry the whole family's burden of guilt! And may the sons and grandsons be forgiven! Have pity on me, Almighty Heaven, and heed my devout supplication; send me an early death that I may atone for the sins of my children and grandchildren!'

As this mumbled prayer came to an end, Grandmother Jia broke down and began sobbing so pitifully that she all but choked. Faithful and Amber consoled her, helped her to her feet and escorted her back into the house.

Lady Wang came in shortly afterwards with Bao-yu and Bao-chai to pay their evening respects. Grandmother Jia's tearful state moved them greatly, and they all three began crying aloud. Bao-chai had her own cause for grief. Her brother's future was very precarious; no one knew whether his sentence would be reduced or whether he would be released from gaol. As for herself, although Jia Zheng and Lady Wang were not directly affected by recent events, Bao-chai could see that the Jia family was nevertheless crumbling around her, while her own husband continued to behave in as moronic and helpless a fashion as ever. As she contemplated her own plight, her sobs became more heart-rending even that' those of Grandmother Jia and Lady Wang.

Bao-yu himself succumbed t_9 despair.

'Grandmother is crippled with care in her old age, Mother and Father are weighed down with sorrow. My sisters and cousins are gone, scattered like clouds on the four winds, and every day leaves me more alone, with nothing to sustain me but memories of past happiness, of the golden days of the poetry club in the Garden. Ever since Cousin Lin's death, there's been nothing I can do to shake off this lethargy and depression, and I only keep myself from perpetual weeping so as not to upset Chai, who worries herself about her brother and grieves for her mother, and rarely so much as lets a smile cross her face.'

Bao-chai's inconsolable weeping affected him so deeply that finally he began wailing desperately himself which in its turn upset Faithful, Suncloud, Oriole and Aroma, and soon all of them, each for their separate reasons, were sobbing profusely. Eventually this incapacitating wave of grief spread to the other maids and there was no one left to play the part of comforter. A chorus of lamentation filled the room and reached the ears of the serving-women on night-duty outside, who sent urgent word to Jia Zheng.

Jia Zheng was sitting brooding in his study (as had become his wont) when the news reached him. He sprang up in alarm and hurried towards Grandmother Jia's apartment. On his way he heard the sound of many voices wailing in the distance and feared the worst for the old lady. His heart sank as he hurried on into her apartment. He found her, however, to his great relief sobbing but alive and well.

He turned to the assembled family and reproached them:

'At a time like this, you should be comforting Lady Jia, not making matters worse with all this crying.'

There was a sudden silence, during which they all looked round at each other in amazement. Jia Zheng said a few soothing words to Grandmother Jia, then spoke to the others again before leaving.

'We came here to cheer Lady Jia up,' they were thinking to themselves. 'We meant to comfort her. How could we forget ourselves like this and make matters worse!'

They were still in this state of bewilderment, when an old serving-woman arrived with two women from the Shi household. Having curtseyed to Grandmother Jia and greeted all the others present, they delivered their message:

'Our Master the Marquis, Her Grace the Marchioness and Miss Shi have sent us with this message: they have heard your news and want to assure you that this will be nothing more than a temporary setback. They were concerned that Sir Zheng and Their Ladyships might be unduly distressed, and asked us particularly to say that Sir Zheng should set his mind at ease. He himself is in no danger. Miss Shi would have come herself but she is being married in a few days' time.'

Grandmother Jia felt a little awkward about expressing her gratitude to these serving-women.

'When you return,' she said, 'please convey my regards to your Master and Mistress. What our family has suffered was decreed by fate. Another day I shall call in person to thank the Marquis and Marchioness for their concern. As for Xiang-yun's marriage, I'm sure they must have found her a fine young man for a husband. I should be so pleased to know a little about his family.'

'His family is not a particularly wealthy one,' replied the women. 'But he is a very nice young man, and has such a gentle nature. We have seen him quite a few times, and he closely resembles your Master Bao. He also has considerable literary talent.'

Grandmother Jia was very pleased with this description.

'It sounds most suitable I must say. Xiang-yun is a lucky girl. Her family and ours have always abided by the old Southern marriage customs, and that is why none of us have set eyes on the groom to this day. Only recently I was thinking about my own family, and particularly about Xiang-yun. She has always been my favourite. She used to spend over half the year with me when she was a little girl. I had meant to find a nice husband for her myself when she grew up, but with her uncle away from home I could hardly be the one to take the initiative. Well, fortune has smiled on her, and she has found a good match, so now I can set my mind at rest. I know that they'll be married within the month, and I would have so liked to drink a cup of wine at the

reception - but even that's out of the question I'm afraid. This latest upheaval has quite taken my strength away. Please give them my regards when you return, and say that we all send our very best wishes. And tell Miss Shi she is not to worry on my account. I'm over eighty now, and if I die I shall have no cause to complain. I have had more than my share of blessings. My only prayer is that she and her husband may live happily together to a ripe old age. Then I shall rest content.

As she spoke, Grandmother Jia could not help weeping. One of the Shi serving-women replied:

'Please do not distress yourself Lady Jia. Once Miss Shi is married and has celebrated her Ninth Day, I'm sure she and her husband will come here to pay you their respects. Then you will be able to see them yourself and that will make you happy.'

Grandmother Jia nodded.

The women left. Bao-yu seemed to be the only person at all affected by the news of Xiang-yun's impending marriage. He looked somewhat bemused, and thought to himself:

'Why is it that girls have to get married as soon as they grow up? Once they're married, they're bound to change. Even dear Yun has to obey her uncle's will. Now if we meet again, it will never be the same. She is bound to be distant towards me. What is the point of living, if I am to be forever shunned like this?'

He felt himself becoming tearful again. But for Grandmother Jia's sake he endeavoured not to weep and instead sat there brooding silently to himself.

Jia Zheng was still concerned for Grandmother Jia's health, and presently he came in to see how she was. Finding her somewhat improved he went out again and summoned the steward Lai Da, ordering him to bring the complete register of household servants employed in responsible positions. He went over this register with him entry by entry. Apart from Jia She's servants, who had been taken away, there were more than thirty families on the register, with a total of two hundred and twelve male and female servants. Jia Zheng sent for the forty-one male servants at present employed in the mansion and interrogated them all about the accounts for the past years - checking with them the totals for income and expenditure in their various departments. The chief steward presented the ledgers for inspection, and Jia Zheng could see at a glance that none of the figures balanced. Expenditure outweighed income by far, and additional expenses had been incurred over several years in connection with Her Grace the Imperial Concubine. There were several entries revealing irregular loans raised outside. When he looked at the rents from the family estates in the Eastern provinces, he could see that in recent years income had shrunk to less than half what it had been in his grandfather's time, while the family's expenses were ten times as great. This palpable evidence of mismanagement came as a great shock to him, and he stamped his foot angrily:

'This is monstrous! I thought Lian was competent to handle these things! And now I find that we have been mortgaging ourselves up to the hilt in order to keep up an empty show! We've been living far beyond our means. This recklessness was bound to lead to ruin. And it is too late now for me to start introducing economies!'

He paced up and down with his hands behind his back, unable to devise a remedy for the family's deep-seated economic infirmity. His servants knew that their master had no head for business, and that he would only agitate himself to no avail on this score.

'It's no use worrying, sir,' they advised him. 'Every household is the same. Even princes of the realm! If you could but see *their* accounts, you'd find that they fail to balance their books too. They just keep up appearances and muddle along from day to day as best they can. You should think how lucky you've been. The Emperor's been kind and allowed you to keep your part of the family property. Mind you, even if everything had been confiscated, you would still have been able to get by somehow or other!'

'What nonsense you talk!' cried Jia Zheng angrily. 'You servants are worthless rogues, every last one of you! When your masters prosper, you spend their money as you please; and when there's nothing left to spend, you beat a retreat at the first opportunity. What is it to you if we live or die? You say we are lucky not to have had

everything confiscated - but what do you know? Do you realize that with our reputation as it stands at present, we'll be hard put to it to avoid bankruptcy. And with you putting on airs, acting as if you were rich, talking as if you were important, swindling people left right and centre, we don't stand a chance. When calamity strikes, you are quite content to see us take all the consequences. I am informed that it was one of your number, a servant by the name of Bao Er, who spread the very rumours that have incriminated my brother and Mr Zhen. Why is his name nowhere to be seen on this register?'

'Bao Er isn't officially on our books, sir,' came the reply. 'He was originally on the Ning-guo register. Then he caught Mr Lian's eye as a trustworthy sort of person, and both he and his wife were taken on by Mr Lian. His wife died, and after that he went back to Ning-guo House. Once when you were busy at the Board, sir, and Her Old Ladyship and Their Ladyships and the other young masters were all away mourning at the mausoleum, Mr Zhen came over to inspect things on this side, and brought Bao Er with him. Bao Er went back with him to Ning-guo House again afterwards. It is so many years since you were involved in matters of this nature, sir, and it is hardly surprising if such details slip your mind. You probably think his is the only name not entered on the register. The fact is that every man has several dependants - even servants have servants of their own!'

'Preposterous!' exclaimed Jia Zheng.

An immediate solution to these economic ills still failed to present itself to Jia Zheng's mind, and he sent the servants away. He had already resolved what general course of action to follow, but decided to wait first to see the nature of the sentence passed on Jia She and Cousin Zhen.

A day or so later, he was in his study puzzling his head over some figures, when a servant came hurrying in to inform him that his presence was immediately required at court. Jia Zheng set off at once, in a state of extreme trepidation. To learn whether the outcome was favourable or otherwise, please turn to the next chapter.

CHAPTER 107

Impelled by family devotion, Grandmother Jia
distributes her personal possessions
Favoured with an Imperial dispensation, Jia Zheng
receives his brother's hereditary rank

Jia Zheng arrived at the Palace, and greeted the various princes and ministers of the Privy Council assembled there to meet him.

'His Majesty has instructed us to send for you,' said the Prince of Bei-jing. 'He would like us to ask you one or two questions.'

Jia Zheng fell hastily to his knees, and the inquisition proceeded:

'Were you aware that your elder brother had connived with a provincial official for personal gain? That he had abused his influence and bullied a defenceless citizen? That he had permitted his son to indulge in gambling and loose living, and that this same son forcefully took to his bed the fiancée of an innocent person and drove her to her death when she would not gratify his desires? Were you aware of all this?'

Jia Zhen replied as best he could:

'Upon the expiry of my term of office as Education Commissioner, an appointment I owed to the gracious favour of His Majesty, I was engaged at first in supervising relief measures, and then on my return home at the end of last winter I was deputed by my superiors to inspect reconstruction work and was subsequently appointed Grain Intendant for Kiangsi Province. From this last post I returned to the capital under

impeachment, and have now resumed my former position at the Board of Works. I have truly endeavoured to be diligent in the performance of all these official duties, but I fear that I have completely neglected to keep my own household in order. For this inexcusable shortcoming on my part, for my abject failure to instruct my sons and nephews in the true principles of conduct, for my base ingratitude to the throne, I can only beg that His Majesty will punish me with fitting severity.'

The Prince of Bei-jing went in to communicate this to the Emperor, and after a short while returned with the Imperial Edict, which he declaimed to the assembled company:

'We have received an indictment from the Censorate stating that Jia She connived with a provincial official and abused his own personal influence to bully a defenceless citizen. The provincial official named by the censor was the prefect of Ping-an. Jia She, so the impeachment reads, was in communication with this prefect with a view to perverting the true course of justice. When closely interrogated, however, Jia She testified that the prefect was in fact a relation of his by marriage and that their connection was a purely personal one. The censor has therefore been unable to substantiate this part of the charge. Another part, however, has been verified, namely that Jia She abused his personal influence in coercing the man named Stony to part with a set of antique fans. These fans were none the less trifles, and the case must therefore be distinguished from serious cases of extortion. Stony's subsequent suicide can also be ascribed to his own eccentricity, and he cannot be strictly considered to have been "driven to his death". We see fit to show leniency to Jia She, and hereby sentence him to penal service at a military post on the Mongolian border, where he shall redeem himself by diligent service.

'With reference to the first charge brought against Jia Zhen, that he forcefully took to his bed the betrothed of an innocent citizen and drove her to her death when she would not gratify his desires: upon consulting the original records at the Censorate, We find that the lady in question, a certain Miss You Er-jie, was betrothed to a certain Zhang Hua when both were still in their mothers' wombs. The marriage was never solemnized, indeed Zhang himself wished to annul it on the grounds of his own poverty. The lady's mother was also quite willing for her daughter to be taken as a concubine, not by Jia Zhen himself but by his younger cousin. So clearly this was not a case of forceful appropriation. Then the case of Miss You San-jie: the charge here is that following her suicide she was buried secretly and the facts of her death were concealed from the authorities. On further investigation it has been found that this Miss You San-jie was the younger sister of Jia Zhen's wife, and that it was his original intention to arrange a marriage for her. The widespread and malicious rumours circulating about her character, her own subsequent feelings of shame and remorse and the insistence of her fiancé that she should return his betrothal gifts were the cause of her suicide, not any direct maltreatment or coercion on the part of Jia Zhen. As the holder of a hereditary rank, however, Jia Zheng deserves to be severely punished for his ignorance of the law and for his failure to report the burial of a deceased person. In view of the fact that he is a descendant of a loyal and distinguished subject, We cannot bring ourselves to impose the heavy penalty strictly required by law, but choose to exercise Our discretion, hereby sentencing him to be stripped of his hereditary rank and sent to a maritime frontier region, there to redeem himself by diligent service. Jia Rong, who is too young to have been involved in these affairs, is acquitted. Jia Zheng has for many years held provincial posts in which he has served conscientiously and prudently, and he is absolved from the consequences of his failure to govern his household correctly.'

Jia Zheng responded to the Edict with tears of gratitude, and hastily kowtowed, first in the direction of the Imperial throne, then towards the prince, whom he begged to convey to the Emperor a humble plea of devotion.

'A simple kowtow will suffice,' said the prince. 'There is no need of anything further.'

'My gratitude to His Majesty, for so graciously absolving me of blame, and for restoring my portion of the family property, knows no bounds,' said Jia Zheng. 'I feel a great sense of inner remorse. Please allow me to donate to the Imperial purse all my hereditary emoluments and accumulated property.'

‘His Majesty is indeed humane and compassionate towards His subjects,’ replied the prince. ‘He is wise and discriminating in his judgements, and never errs, whether it be in recompensing virtue or in punishing vice. In having your property thus restored, you have been blessed with his exceptional favour. There is really no call for any further gesture on your part.’

The other gentlemen present concurred.

So Jia Zheng kowtowed again, first towards the Emperor and then to the prince, and left the Palace, hurrying home to hear the news to Grandmother Jia, knowing the anxious suspense in which she would be awaiting his return. The entire Jia household, menfolk and womenfolk, were waiting anxiously at the entrance of Rong-guo House to learn the outcome of his interview, and breathed a huge sigh of relief when they saw him return safely home. None dared to question him as he hurried past them and on into Grandmother Jia’s apartment. He recounted to her the details of the latest Edict; and Grandmother Jia, though pleased that some of the charges had been dropped, was understandably distressed to learn that the two titles were lost to the family and that both Jia She and Cousin Zhen were sentenced to penal servitude. Lady Xing and You-shi simply broke down when they heard the news.

‘You must not distress yourself Mother,’ pleaded Jia Zheng. ‘Al-though Brother She will have to work at the Mongolian frontier post, he will still be serving the nation, and will not be maltreated. If he acquits himself creditably, he may be fully reinstated. As for Zhen, he is still a young man and a bit of hard work certainly won’t do him any harm. This is a lesson we would have had to learn sooner or later. We cannot rest for ever on the laurels of our forefathers.’

He added a few more words of this kind, which comforted Grandmother Jia. After all, she had never been particularly fond of Jia She, and Cousin Zhen was not her own grandson. But Lady Xing and You-shi were inconsolable.

‘We are ruined!’ thought Lady Xing to herse£ ‘With my husband sent into exile in his old age, who can I turn to? Lian is supposed to be my son, but he has always attached himself more to his uncle Zheng than to his own father. Now that we are all dependent on Zheng, Lian and Xi-feng are bound to lean even more towards that side of the family. I shall be completely abandoned; I have nothing to look forward to but loneliness and misery for the rest of my days.’

You-shi had always been in charge of Ning-guo House, and apart from Cousin Zhen she was the only one of the family to have earned the respect of the domestic staff. She and Cousin Zhen had a happy marriage moreover. Now he was to be sent away in disgrace, every-thing they had was confiscated, and they would be obliged to look to the Rong-guo branch for support. Grandmother Jia loved her well enough, but still, she would be the recipient of charity, and she would have to bring Lovey and Dove along with her, not to mention young Rong and his wife, who were still too young to be independent.

‘It was really Lian’s fault that my sisters came to such a wretched end,’ she reflected. ‘And yet he and Xi-feng have survived unscathed, while we are reduced to this desperate state of affairs.’

Grandmother Jia was greatly affected by You-shi’s disconsolate sobbing, and she turned to Jia Zheng and asked him:

‘Now that their sentence has been pronounced, will your brother She and young Zhen be allowed to come home to say goodbye? Rong has been acquitted, so I assume that *he* will be set free.’

‘In the normal course of events such a visit would not be allowed,’ replied Jia Zheng. ‘But I have already asked if as a personal favour Brother She and Cousin Zhen could be allowed home to make preparations for their departure, and the Board of Punishments has most graciously agreed to make this concession. I assume that Rong will be set free and will accompany them. Now, please don’t you worry, Mother. I shall do all I can for them.’

‘I’m growing old and senile,’ said Grandmother Jia. ‘It’s years since I last enquired about the family’s finances. The Ning-guo side has had everything confiscated, I know, and that of course includes the house itself. On our

side, your brother She and Lian have had their things taken too. Now, you'd better tell me: how much money do we have left? And what are our estates in the Eastern provinces worth? When those two have to go, we must give them a few thousand taels of silver to take with them.'

Jia Zheng saw himself caught.

'If I tell the truth,' he thought to himself, 'I fear it will come as a great blow. But if I conceal it, heaven alone knows how we will be able to pay for our present needs, let alone manage in the future.'

'Had you not asked, Mother,' he began, 'I would never have bothered you with this. But since you have asked, and since Lian is present, I am bound to say that yesterday I examined the family accounts, and discovered the truth. Which is this: our exchequer has for a long time been completely empty - in fact, more than empty. There are substantial debts. I must somehow find money, and without delay, to mollify the officials involved in Brother She's case. Without such intervention I fear they will both suffer, despite His Majesty's generous concern. I am still not certain how this money can be raised. The Eastern estates cannot be depended on for anything. The rents for the forthcoming year have long been borrowed against. Our only recourse will be to sell what clothes and jewellery they are lucky enough to have left in their possession, and to let Brother She and Cousin Zhen take the proceeds of that sale with them. How we ourselves will manage afterwards is another matter altogether.'

Grandmother Jia was once more reduced to floods of tears.

'Is it really so desperate? Can we have fallen so low? I've never experienced anything like this. I can remember my own family in the old days; they were ten times as grand as us, yet they managed to live beyond their means for years. And even in the end, no such calamity as this ever befell them. It was more gradual. It must have been a year or two before they were finished. But you seem to be saying that we may not even last another year!'

'If only we still had the two hereditary state emoluments to fall back on,' said Jia Zheng. 'Then we might be able to procure a loan. But as things stand, no one is going to lend us a penny.'

Even his cheeks were now streaming with tears.

'It's certainly no use turning to our own relatives for help,' he continued. 'The ones that owe us a favour are penniless, and the ones that don't are unlikely to come forward and help us now. I did not examine the accounts in any detail yesterday, but I did glance at the register of household staf£ We can barely afford to keep ourselves alive, let alone such a host of servants.'

These final details in Jia Zheng's tale of financial woe plunged Grandmother Jia in still deeper gloom. Presently Jia She, Cousin Zhen and Jia Rong arrived and paid her their respects. The sight of them somehow brought home to her the true horror of their predicament. She took Jia She by one hand, Cousin Zhen by the other and burst out sobbing. The two men hung their heads in shame and, when she began weeping, fell to their knees and cried:

'We have dishonoured the family! We have forfeited the glory won by our forefathers! We have brought you grief! We are not even worthy to be buried when we die!'

At this a chorus of wailing filled the room.

'Come on now,' urged Jia Zheng. 'We must lose no time in thinking of a way to provide them with funds. They can stay with us only a day or two at the most.'

Grandmother Jia did her best to contain her grief.

'Go now, both of you,' she said, holding back her tears, 'and speak with your wives.' She turned to Jia Zheng: 'There must be no delay, and I can see it would be futile trying to borrow. We have so little time. I shall have to do something mysel£ Oh dear, this is all so dreadfully confusing! Things mustn't be allowed to go on like this!'

She called Faithful to her and sent her off with some secret instructions.

Jia She and Cousin Zhen meanwhile left the room and conversed tearfully with Jia Zheng outside, expressing

their remorse for their past waywardness and anticipating with gloom the bitter exile that lay ahead. Then they went over and lamented with their wives. Jia She was growing old, and the prospect of separation was less harrowing for him and Lady Xing than it was for Cousin Zhen and You-shi.

Jia Lian and Jia Rong held their fathers' hands and wept at their side. Frontier service was a less severe punishment than military exile, but it would still be a long and painful ordeal. They could only try to steel themselves to it as best they could.

Grandmother Jia told Lady Xing, Lady Wang, Faithful and a bevy of maids to look through every one of her trunks and boxes, and to take out all the personal belongings she had stored away over the years of her marriage. Then she summoned Jia She, Jia Zheng, Cousin Zhen and all the other menfolk to attend while she made a distribution. She began by giving Jia She three thousand taels of silver.

'You are to take two thousand with you,' she said, 'for the journey and for any expenses afterwards, and leave one thousand here for your wife. This three thousand is for you, Zhen. You must take one thousand with you, and leave two thousand for your wife. In this way, although they will be living with us, they will still be independent and able to make separate catering arrangements. I shall provide for Xi-chun's marriage when the time comes. Now Xi-feng; I feel sorry for her, she tried so hard for so long, and has ended up with nothing. She too shall have three thousand taels, and she is to keep all of it for her own use and not give a penny to Lian. I know she is much too ill now, and in no fit state to come and receive it herself, so Patience can take it to her.

'Here are some robes that once belonged to my husband, and some of the gowns and jewellery that I used to wear when I was young - I don't need them any more. The men's clothing can be divided between She, Zhen, Lian and Rong. Their wives can share the ladies' things. This five hundred taels of silver is for Lian to pay for transporting Miss Lin's coffin to the South next year.'

When this distribution was complete, she turned to Jia Zheng:

'The debts you mentioned must be honoured at once. Take this gold and use it for that purpose. Their misdeeds have driven me to these drastic measures, but don't think I have forgotten that you too are my son. In due time you will receive your fair share. Bao-yu is married and can have what is left here - gold and silver worth several thousand taels. And Li Wan: she has always been such a dutiful granddaughter4n4aw to me, and little Lan is such a sweet child. Here's some for them too. There, I've finished.'

Jia Zheng was moved to tears to see how clearly she had worked everything out.

'We have failed you, Mother!' he sobbed, falling to his knees. 'We have not done our filial duty towards you in your old age; and yet you shower us with such bounty! How can we ever outlive our shame!'

'Oh poppycock!' exclaimed Grandmother Jia. 'Don't you worry, if it weren't for this crisis I should certainly have kept it all for myself! But let's be serious: our staff is much too large. You are the only one left with an official post, Zheng, so we don't need more than a few servants. Tell the stewards to call the staff together and make the necessary arrangements. Each establishment must make do with as few servants as possible. We would have had to manage with none at all if our household had been confiscated. The same goes for the ladies' apartments. We must find husbands for some of the maids, and give others back their freedom. And although our property has not been taken, I still think it would be best if you handed over the Garden. Lian should be given the job of sorting out the country estates. Some can be sold, some kept on, as seems most appropriate. Above all there must be no more pomp in future, no more empty show. We must be realistic. And another thing I should mention. We still have some money belonging to the Zhen family of Nanking. It's in safe keeping with your wife, Zheng. Someone should be Sent to take it back to them straight away. If anything else should happen to us, we'd only involve them in a lot more trouble, push them out of the frying-pan and into the fire.'

Jia Zheng, who was painfully aware of his own incompetence in such matters, mumbled a contrite 'Yes, Mother' to all of these eminently practical instructions, thinking to himself:

'What a flair she has for organization! And what worthless bunglers we all are by comparison!'

He could see that Grandmother Jia was tired, and begged her to lie down and rest.

'The little you see here is all I have left,' she said. 'When I die, you can use some of it to pay for my funeral, and give the remainder to my maids.'

They found this mention of her death greatly upsetting, and all fell to their knees once more.

'Please set your mind at ease, Mother. In time to come, if we enioy your blessing and can once more regain His Majesty's favour, then we shall do our utmost to atone for past errors, to restore the family fortune and to support you into your hundredth year.'

'If you can only somehow make amends,' said Grandmother Jia, 'then perhaps I shall be able to face our ancestors with pride when I die. Don't think that I know only how to enjoy a comfortable life, and that I have no stomach for poverty! That's not it at all. It's just that I am rather shocked by all this. During the past few years you have seemed so prosperous, and I was only too glad not to interfere; to jolly along and mind my own business. I never for one moment imagined that we were in such a precarious state. I've always known that we were living beyond our means, of course, but I thought somehow we'd manage to muddle through. I suppose we were "dulled by habit"; we couldn't adjust, we were too used to things as they were. Well now we must use this opportunity to economize and set things to rights, or else our family will be the laughing-stock of the world. You may think it's the poverty that appals me. But it's not. What I have always cared about more than anything is our family tradition, our family honour. Every day of my life has been lived in the hope that this generation would outshine our ancestors. But I would have been content just to maintain our position as it was. I had no idea of the disgraceful jiggery-pokery those two were up to behind my back!'

Grandmother Jia was ruminating aloud in this fashion when Felicity came hurrying into the room and ran over to Lady Wang in a great fluster:

'Oh Your Ladyship! Mrs Lian heard the news from court this morning, and she's cried such a lot that now she seems quite faint. Patience sent me over to let you know.'

'How *is* Mrs Lian?' Grandmother Jia asked her before she'd finished speaking. 'Not at all well today,' replied Lady Wang on Felicity's behalf.

'Ail' exclaimed the old lady, rising wearily to her feet. 'These young people are the bane of my life! I can see they want to drive me into my grave!'

She asked her maids to assist her and announced her intention of paying Xi-feng a visit herself Jia Zheng hastened to detain her, and endeavoured to calm her down:

'This has all been so distressing for you, Mother. You have already exerted yourself so much in finding a solution to our problems. You really must give yourself a bit of a rest. I am sure my wife can go over and see to Xi-feng. There is no need for you to expose yourself to any further upsets. If anything serious were to happen to you, how should I ever forgive myself.'

'You may all leave now,' ordered Lady Jia. 'Come back a little later. There are still a few things I want to say.'

Jia Zheng, his attempt at filial consolation having been thus peremptorily crushed, did not venture to say any more. He went out to superintend the practical arrangements for the convicts' departure and instructed Jia Lian to choose some servants to accompany them.

Faithful assembled a group of serving-women to carry Xi-feng's presents and to escort Grandmother Jia over to Xi-feng's apartment. Xi-feng was very weak and almost unconscious, while Patience's eyes were **red** and swollen from crying. When she heard that Lady Jia and Lady Wang, accompanied by Bao-yu and Bao-chai, were on their way, Patience hurried out anxiously to greet them.

'How is she now?' asked Grandmother Jia the moment she saw Patience.

Patience was afraid of frightening the old lady.

'A little better, ma'am.'

She escorted the party inside and hurrying over to Xi-feng's bed lightly drew aside the bed curtains. Xi-feng opened her eyes and, when she saw Grandmother Jia enter the room, was filled with shame. Earlier she had

come to the conclusion-that the whole family had turned against her, that no one cared for her any more, that they were all indifferent whether she lived or died. And yet now Grandmother Jia had come to visit her personally. Her spirits were immediately restored, and she even struggled to sit up; but Grandmother Jia ordered Patience to settle her down again.

'Don't you move, dear,' she said to Xi-feng. 'Are you feeling a little better now?'

'Oh yes, Grannie, I am. A lot better,' replied Xi-feng, holding back her tears. 'But it grieves me when I think how you and Mother and Aunt Wang have loved me, ever since I came here as a young bride, and how little I have been able to return that love. How cruelly fate has possessed me, driving me quite out of my mind, making me fail in my duty to you and Aunt Wang, preventing me from ever winning your praise ... Yet still you trusted me, still you allowed me to play my part. And all I've ever done is ruin things for everyone! How can I look you and Auntie in the face again? This visit is more than I deserve. I'm afraid Heaven will punish me for it, by taking away most of the few days I may have left to live...

She sobbed violently.

'This whole nonsense was started by the men,' Grandmother Jia consoled her. 'It was nothing to do with you. I know some of your belongings have been taken, but don't you worry: I've brought you all sorts of presents - take a look and see.'

She instructed one of the serving-women to bring the presents forward and exhibit them. Possessions had always meant a great deal to Xi-feng, and the sudden loss of all of her worldly goods had dealt a severe blow to her morale. She had also been tormenting herself with the thought that everyone in the family secretly blamed her for what had happened, and as a consequence she had all but lost her will to live. This new evidence of Grandmother Jia's affection was a much-needed tonic; and it seemed that Lady Wang was not really so cross with her either, to judge from the fact that she had accompanied Grandmother Jia. And had Jia Lian not been acquitted, after all? Xifeng kowtowed to Grandmother Jia from her pillow:

'Please don't worry on my behalf, Grannie. If I can continue to enjoy your blessing, and if I recover my health, I'll gladly be your lowliest maidservant and do any menial task, devote myself heart and soul for the rest of my life to serving you and Aunt Wang.'

This abject gratitude was too pitiful a sight for Grandmother Jia, and she broke down and wept. Bao-yu immediately followed suit. He had never witnessed anything resembling a family crisis. His life till recently had consisted for the most part of peaceful and pleasant pursuits, and he had been protected from too close an acquaintance with real suffering. But now wherever he turned he saw anguish and weeping. It had the effect of accentuating his imbecility; and if he saw anyone else crying, he instantly responded by doing likewise.

Seeing what low spirits her visitors were in, Xi-feng did her best to muster a few cheerful words, and then begged Grandmother Jia and Lady Wang to return to their apartments, promising to come and kowtow to them as soon as she was well enough. She raised her head feebly from the pillow as she spoke.

'Look after her well now,' Grandmother Jia enjoined Patience. 'And if you're short of anything, be sure to come and let me know.'

She took Lady Wang back with her to her own apartment. On the way, she could hear the sound of weeping coming from every quarter. It was more than she could bear. She sent Lady Wang away and told Bao-yu to bid his Uncle She and Cousin Zhen farewell and to return immediately afterwards.

Left on her own, she sank onto her couch in tears. Faithful tried every way she knew of consoling her, and finally Grandmother Jia dozed off.

Understandably Jia She and Cousin Zhen viewed the prospect of their exile with little relish. The men chosen to accompany them were equally reluctant to go, and complained bitterly of their lot. To be parted in life is in truth more painful than to be parted by death, and the witnessing of such a parting often more distressing than the parting itself. Rong-guo House, once a scene of such brilliance and distinction, now echoed with the sounds of wailing and lamentation.

Jia Zheng had always been a great stickler for formalities, and despite everything he continued to observe towards Jia She the solemn respect prescribed towards an elder brother. The two brothers shook hands at home, and Jia Zheng then rode out ahead to beyond the city walls and there waited to drink the ritual farewell cup of wine. He exhorted Jia She to remember the compassion the state had shown him on his ancestors' account, and to prove himself worthy of it. Jia She and Cousin Zhen wiped the tears from their eyes, and set off for their different destinations.

Jia Zheng returned home with Bao-yu. As they neared the gateway of Rong-guo House they saw a crowd gathered outside and heard a confused hubbub of voices:

'An Imperial Edict issued today! The Rong-guo hereditary rank and title to be passed on to Sir Zheng!'

The men in the crowd were demanding their statutory tip for bringing this good news, but the janitors were resisting vigorously:

'The title belonged to the family in the first place, and was inherited by our masters. That's not worth a tip!'

'Come on!' came the indignant reply. 'Think of the glory! A title like that is the most glorious thing there is - and your Sir She could never hope to get it back, not after what he's done. Now His Majesty, in his wisdom and mercy, greater than the sky is broad, has passed it on to Sir Zheng; why, that's nothing less than a miracle for your family! Definitely worth a tip!'

Jia Zheng entered the house and received a full report on the matter from the janitors. His pleasure was inevitably mingled with shame that his own good fortune had been made possible only by his elder brother's disgrace. He was momentarily overwhelmed and wept tears of emotion. Then he hurried in to convey the news to Grandmother Jia, who took him delightedly by the hand and urged him to show himself worthy of this signal honour. Lady Wang was also present, anxious that Grandmother Jia might be *souffrante* and in need of consolation, and she too was delighted to hear Jia Zheng's news. Only Lady Xing and You-shi felt their own misfortune the more keenly, an emotion they took pains to conceal.

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The family's sponging friends and relatives, who had kept well clear while times were hard, learned that Jia Zheng had now been given his brother's title and - deducing from this that the Emperor must still view the Jias with a favourable eye - flocked to Rong-guo House to offer their felicitations. But Jia Zheng's feelings were running along very different lines. He was by nature a man of such soul-searching integrity that, so far from congratulating himself on his good luck, he was greatly troubled at heart, and wondered how he would ever be able to show his gratitude sufficiently. The following day he went to the Palace to make a formal expression of thanks, and this time went so far as to submit a memorial begging that his restored residence, together with Prospect Garden, be accepted as a gift by the Emperor. An Edict was issued in reply to this request, dismissing it as quite superfluous; and Jia Zheng, his conscience a little placated, returned home and applied himself with devotion and zeal to his official duties.

The family's finances were still as precarious as ever. Income continued to fall far short of expenditure. Entertaining, making connections with the right people and winning favours were not Jia Zheng's strong point. The servants knew how incorrigibly upright he was, while Xi-feng was still sick and unable to apply her experience to the solving of the present crisis. The debts Jia Lian was forced to incur were mounting daily, and it seemed almost inevitable that he would have to mortgage still more property and sell still more land. The servants could see it coming. Some of them were quite wealthy themselves and were worried that Jia Lian might come to them for money. Some tried to keep out of harm's way by feigning poverty, some asked for leave of absence and went looking for other employment.

One exception was Bao Yong. Though he was a newcomer and had arrived only a short while before the crisis, he proved to be a most industrious and loyal servant, and was appalled by the way the other servants were

taking advantage of their masters. He had in-sufficient status among the domestic staff to dare voice his feelings to the offenders, and could only eat his evening meal and take his indignation to bed. The others disliked him for not going along with them, and complained about him to Jia Zheng, calling him an in-competent, a drunkard and a troublemaker.

'Let him be,' was Jia Zheng's response. 'He was recommended to me by the Zhens, and we cannot be too hard on him. After all, we may be poor, but we can surely afford to feed one extra mouth.'

When they failed in their attempts to have him sacked by the master, the servants turned next to Jia Lian with their complaints; but Jia Lian felt in no position to exert his authority, and in the end they had to let Bao Yong be.

One day Bao Yong was feeling particularly angry and, having drunk a few cups of wine to comfort himself, went for a stroll in the street outside the main entrance to Rong-guo House, where he happened to overhear the following conversation:

'See that great mansion in there?' said one of the two men, pointing to Rong-guo House. 'Wonder how they're managing after that raid the other day...'

'Oh they'll be all right!' replied the other. 'I've heard that one of their daughters was a concubine of His Majesty's. She's dead now, but a connection like that doesn't die so quickly. And they're on hob-nobbing terms with all sorts of princes, dukes, marquises and earls. They'll never be short of friends. Take the present Mayor, who used to be Minister of War, he's from the same family. With people like that to look after them, they'll always be all right.'

'Hm!' replied the first. 'You may live locally, but I can see you're rather out of touch. I don't know about their other friends, but that Mayor Jia you mentioned is a regular bounder! I'll tell you why I say that. I've seen him at Rong-guo House countless times, so I know he's had a lot to do with them in the past. When the censor brought that indictment against members of the Jia family, the Emperor asked him to look into the matter and establish the facts of the case. And what do you think he did? Because he owed both branches of the family big favours himself, and because he was afraid he'd be suspected of covering up for his own friends, he went to the other extreme. He said the most terrible things about them. That's what led to both houses being raided. It's shocking how people treat their friends nowadays, isn't it!'

This casual conversation happened to fall on the ears of one who understood only too clearly what it meant.

'That such a scoundrel should live and breathe on this earth!' thought Bao Yong secretly to himself. 'I wonder what relation of the Master's he is? If I so much as set eyes on him, I'll beat the innards out of him! To hell with the consequences!'

Wild (and somewhat befuddled) thoughts of revenge filled Bao Yong's loyal breast. Suddenly the cry of official runners could be heard clearing the way, and from where he was standing Bao Yong heard one of the bystanders whisper to the other:

'Why, here he comes now, the very Mayor Jia we were talking about!'

Bao Yong was seething with righteous indignation, and the wine lent him the final touch of inspiration and courage.

'Blackguard!' he yelled recklessly. 'Scurvy knave! Would you forget the kindness shown you by our masters the Jias?'

From within his sedan Jia Yu-cun heard the name 'Jia' and leaned forward to see what was going on. Just another drunken lout in the street, not worth bothering with. His sedan moved on, and Bao Yong swaggered home feeling very pleased with himself and far too drunk to be discreet. He made a few enquiries, and his fellow-servants confirmed that the Mayor did indeed owe his entire career to the patronage of the Jia family.

'Well he's an ungrateful scoundrel, and I've told him so!' boasted Bao Yong. 'After all they've done for him, to kick them in the teeth like that! I gave him a piece of my mind, and he didn't dare answer me back either...

Until now, the other servants, who were united in their dislike of Bao Yong, had been unable to persuade Jia

Zheng to get rid of him. This was the very pretext they had been waiting for, and they seized their chance to report him to the Master for being drunk and disorderly and creating a disturbance in the street. Jia Zheng was extremely nervous of provoking the authorities any further, and was very angry when he heard of Bao Yong's riotous behaviour. He summoned him and gave him a thorough dressing-down. He still felt that in view of his connection with the Zhens it would be wrong to punish him too severely, and instead transferred him to caretaking duties in the Garden, with strict instructions not to go wandering outside again.

Bao Yong was a straightforward sort of fellow. Once he worked for a man, that man was his master, to serve and protect with every ounce of loyalty he had. He was greatly dismayed that Jia Zheng should have listened to tales and been misled into scolding him in this fashion. But he did not say a word in protest. He merely packed his bags and moved into the Garden to commence his new duties.

To learn what followed, please read the next chapter.

CHAPTER 108

A birthday party held for Sister Allspice necessitates
a false display of jollity
And ghostly weeping heard at the Naiad's House provokes
a fresh outburst of grief

We have already told how the Emperor rejected Jia Zheng's plea to donate both Rong-guo Rouse and Prospect Garden to the throne. None of the Jia family lived in the Garden any longer, and its gates were permanently locked. You-shi and Xi-chun, whose temporary lodgings in Rong-guo House adjoined the Garden wall, found it an eerie and desolate place to be near, and it was partly for this reason that Bao Yong had been appointed caretaker.

Jia Zheng now applied himself in earnest to the practicalities of the household, and in accordance with Grandmother Jia's instructions endeavoured to implement a gradual reduction in the size of the staff, and a range of other economies. But he soon found the task too much for him, and turned for help to Xi-feng. Although Lady Wang had little affection left for her, Xi-feng was still a favourite of Grandmother Jia's, and Jia Zheng judged that one way or another, despite everything, she must have retained some of her flair for business. She accepted the responsibility with a good grace, only to discover that the depredations of the Embroidered Jackets and the financial after-effects of the raid had made it impossible to get any-thing done in Rong-guo House. The necessary funds were simply not forthcoming. The ladies and their maids, from the highest to the lowest, used as they were to a life of ease, and finding that in their new and greatly reduced circumstances many of their old everyday luxuries could no longer be afforded, did nothing but complain. Xi--feng did her utmost to fulfil her duties, and despite her illness tried to please Grandmother Jia as best she could.

Jia She and Cousin Zhen eventually arrived at their designated places of exile. Thanks to the sums of money they had taken with them, they were comfortable enough, for the present at any rate, and both wrote home that they were well and that the family was not to worry on their account. Grandmother Jia was much relieved, and the news brought a little comfort to their wives.

Some days later, Shi Xiang-yun, who was now married and had paid her Ninth Day visit to her own home, came to call on Grandmother Jia. The old lady said what a favourable report she had heard of her husband, while Xiang-yun confirmed that married life was turning out happily for her, and begged Grandmother Jia to

set her mind at rest. At the mention of Dai-yu's death they both shed tears, and Grandmother Jia's distress was further increased by the thought of Ying-chun and her trials. Xiang-yun remained with her for a time, doing her best to cheer her up, then went to call on the others, and returned later in the day to Grandmother Jia's apartment to rest. The conversation that evening turned to the Xue family, and Xiang-yun learned from Grandmother Jia how as the result of Pan's escapade the Xues were now facing total ruin. Pan's death sentence had, it is true, been suspended, and he was still alive in gaol; but there was no telling whether or not they would be able to save his life by having the sentence commuted the following year.

'And you still haven't heard about Pan's wife,' Grandmother Jia went on. 'She came to a very nasty end, and there was nearly the most dreadful scandal. But Lord Buddha in his all-seeing wisdom caused her own maid to come forward and tell us the whole story. Mrs Xia for all her antics could do nothing in the face of the truth, and ended up asking herself for the inquest to be waived. Your aunt Xue gave Pan's wife a makeshift burial. She has young Ke living with her now. What a wonderful lad he is. Such a strong sense of duty! He feels he should postpone his own wedding until his cousin Pan is released from gaol and his murder case has been resolved. Of course that makes things rather hard meanwhile for poor Xiu-yan, who has to stay on with her aunt Xing. And it's not much better for Bao-qin, who can't marry her young Mr Mei until after his period of mourning for his father. Dear oh dear! What with one thing and another, our relations seem to be in much the same case as we are ourselves. Let me see now, what other news is there? In the Wang family, your aunt Wang's elder brother, your great-uncle Zi4eng, has passed away; Fengie's elder brother Ren has disgraced himself; and her second uncle Zi-sheng, your other great-uncle Wang, has turned out badly too. He couldn't settle his elder brother's debts, and had to come running to us to bale him out. We've had no news of the Zhens, ever since they too were raided and had their property confiscated.'

'Have you had any news from Tan since she left?' asked Xiang-yun.

'Since her marriage, your uncle Zheng has returned from his post and he tells me that Tan is very happy at her new home, even though of course it is *so* far away down there on the coast. We still haven't heard from her directly, and I do worry about her a great deal. We've had so many other troubles to contend with here, I simply haven't had time to do anything for her. And then there's Xi-chun. I still haven't been able to find a husband for *her*. The less said about young Huan the better. Oh, things have changed greatly since you were here, my dear - greatly for the worse, I'm afraid. Your poor cousin Chai has not had a day's peace ever since she married into our family. And Bao-yu is still as addle-pated as ever. Dear oh dearie me! We really *are* in a sorry state!'

'I grew up here,' said Xiang-yun, 'so of course I know everyone very well. I can see for myself how they've changed. At first I wondered if perhaps they were just being a little distant towards *me*, because I've been away so long. But then I thought it over and could see it wasn't that at all. They wanted to be their old cheerful selves with me, but somehow as soon as we started talking they got upset. That's why I didn't stay long and came back here to you, Grannie.'

'I'm old enough to take what's happened in my stride,' said Grand-mother Jia. 'But the young people seem to go to pieces. I wanted to find some way of cheering them all up for a day, but then I just couldn't summon up the energy.'

'I have an idea,' said Xiang-yun. 'Isn't it Bao-chai's birthday the day after tomorrow? Why don't I stay on to wish her a happy birthday - then we can all enjoy ourselves for a day. What do you Say, Grannie?'

'Goodness! I am getting gaga!' exclaimed Grandmother Jia. 'If you hadn't mentioned it I should have forgotten altogether. Of course you're right! Tomorrow I'll give the cooks some money and we'll have a party. Before Chai married Bao-yu, we must have celebrated her birthday several times. But not since she's been part of the family. Bao-yu, poor child, who used to be such a bundle of mischief and fun, has been so badly affected by our troubles that he can hardly put two words together. I can still count on Wan. *She* never changes, whether times are good or bad. She and little Lan still spend their days quietly together. She's a marvel!'

‘Xi-feng is the most changed,’ said Xiang-yun. ‘She *looks* so different for a start, and no longer speaks with her old zest. Tomorrow I must see if I can draw them out and cheer them all up. But I’m afraid that, although they won’t say so, in their hearts they may resent me for being so lucky and for having...

She stopped short and blushed fiercely. Grandmother Jia understood what she meant.

‘There’s no cause for you to worry on that score, my dear. You and your cousins grew up together as children. You used to play with each other, you were always chatting and laughing together. Don’t think of them in that way. We should all learn to accept life’s ups and downs. We should know how to enjoy prosperity while it lasts, and how to endure poverty with patience. Your cousin Chai has always taken a broad view of life. In the old days, when her family were so well off; she never used to put on airs; and since they’ve fallen on hard times she has been quite unshaken by it all. Now that she’s part of our family, when Bao-yu is nice to her she is as quiet and content as ever, and if he leads her a bit of a song and dance occasionally, I’ve never seen her get ruffled. That girl seems blessed with the most wonderful disposition. Your cousin Dai-yu was so different - quick to criticize others and take offence herself. It was hardly surprising that she died so young, poor child. As for Feng, she’s seen something of life, she should know better than to let little trials and tribulations get her down. It’s a weakness in her character... Yes, I shall set aside a special sum of money for Chai’s birthday, and we’ll make a jolly little party of it and let her enjoy herself properly for once.’

‘That does sound a good idea, Grandmother,’ replied Xiang-yun. ‘I’ll go ahead then and invite all the girls, and we can have a real reunion!’

‘Yes, you go ahead,’ said Grandmother Jia. In her enthusiasm she called Faithful over and said:

‘Take a hundred taels of silver and tell accounts that we want food and drink for a two-day party, starting tomorrow.’

Faithful gave the money to an old serving-woman to take out to the accounts office. The remainder of that evening and night passed without any further event.

The next day a servant was sent to fetch Ying-chun for the party. Aunt Xue and Bao-qin were invited, and were asked to bring Caltrop with them. Mrs Li was also invited, and later that day she arrived together with Li Wen and Li Qi.

These preparations were kept secret from Bao-chai. One of Grandmother Jia’s maids simply came to tell her that her mother had called, and to invite her over to the old lady’s apartment. Bao-chai was pleased to hear of her mother’s arrival, and went dressed as she was to greet her. She found her cousin Bao-qin and Caltrop there, and Mrs Li with the Li sisters, and presumed that they had all come to call upon hearing that the family troubles were over. She greeted Mrs Li, then Grandmother Jia, then exchanged a few words with her mother and said hello to the Li sisters.

‘Now, will the ladies please be seated,’ said Xiang-yun from the side, ‘and we can congratulate our cousin and wish her a long and happy life on this very special occasion.’

Bao-chi looked rather bewildered for a moment. Then she thought to herself, ‘Of course! Tomorrow’s my birthday!’ ‘It’s quite right for you to come and visit Grandmother,’ she protested. ‘But you certainly shouldn’t have gone to all this trouble on my account.

Bao-yu heard this as he came in to greet Aunt Xue and Mrs Li. He had originally been thinking of organizing something for Bao-chai’s birthday himself, but had said nothing to Grandmother Jia because of the general confusion of the past few weeks. He was delighted that Xiang-yun had taken the initiative.

‘Yes, tomorrow’s her birthday,’ he said. ‘I was meaning to remind you, Grannie.’

‘Shame on you.’ cried Xiang-yun with a playful laugh. ‘As if Grannie needed you to remind her! Who do you think invited everyone here but Grannie?’

Bao-chai secretly doubted this. But then she heard Grandmother Jia say to her mother:

‘Poor Chai - it’s been more than a year since she married Bao-yu, and somehow with one thing after another, we’ve never celebrated her birthday. Today I wanted to do it properly, so I invited you and Mrs Li over. I

thought it would be a nice opportunity for us all to have a chat.'

'You're only just starting to feel better, Lady Jia,' protested Aunt Xue. 'It is my daughter who should be thinking how best to do her duty and show you her love and respect. You really shouldn't go to such lengths on young Chai's account.'

'Bao-yu is Grannie's favourite grandson,' said Xiang-yun, 'so of course Grannie has a soft spot for Chai as well! Anyway Chai deserves it!'

Bao-chai hung her head in modest silence.

Bao-yu meanwhile was marvelling to himself at Xiang-yun's forthrightness:

'I always imagined that Xiang-yun would change once she was married; that's why yesterday I was rather reserved with her. As a result I suppose she herself decided to keep her distance. But to hear her talk now, she seems quite the same as ever. Why has marriage made *my* wife more modest and bashful than before, more tongue-tied than ever?'

While these thoughts were passing through his mind, a junior maid came in to announce the arrival of Ying-chun. Shortly afterwards Li Wan and Xi-feng arrived, and they all exchanged greetings. Ying-chun referred to her father's departure:

'I wanted to come and see him before he left, but my husband wouldn't allow me to. He said he didn't want *his* family to be infected by our bad luck. He wouldn't listen to anything I said, and there was nothing I could do. I cried for two or three days.'

'Why did he let you come today then?' asked Xi-feng.

'This time he said that since Uncle Zheng had been given the title, there was no harm in renewing contact.'

She burst into tears.

'I've been feeling quite wretched myself,' Grandmother Jia upbraided her, 'and I asked you all here to celebrate my granddaughterin4aw's birthday and to have a bit of fun. I thought there'd be lots of laughter to cheer us up - and there you go mentioning this unhappy business of yours and upsetting me all over again.'

Ying-chun and the rest were silenced.

Xi-feng tried her hardest to put on a brave front for the occasion and to jolly the old lady along; but somehow she seemed to have lost the knack of making people laugh, and her efforts all fell flat. Grandmother Jia herself was anxious to make it a happy occasion for Baochai, and deliberately egged Xi-feng on.

'You're a lot more cheerful today, aren't you, Grannie?' said Xi-feng, trying her best to oblige. 'Here we all are gathered together again after such a long time. It's quite a reunion!'

Even as she said the words, she looked around her, noticed the all too obvious absence of Lady Xing and You-shi, and fell silent. The word 'reunion' had also jolted Grandmother Jia's memory, and she sent word at once to invite the missing ladies. Lady Xing, You-shi and Xi-chun knew they must obey a summons from Grandmother Jia, even though a party was the very last thing they felt like. The mere fact that Grandmother Jia was celebrating Bao-chai's birthday in the midst of their misfortune was proof enough of where her affections lay. They came into the room looking a picture of misery. Grandmother Jia enquired after Xiu-yan, and Lady Xing concocted an illness that had prevented her niece from attending the party. Grandmother Jia herself knew quite well that Xiu-yan's absence was prompted by the presence at the party of Aunt Xue, the aunt of her husband-to-be.

Presently wine and sweetmeats were served.

'There's no need to send any out to the men,' said Grandmother Jia. 'Today can be ladies' day.'

Though Bao-yu was a married man, as Grannie's favourite he was allowed to join in the fun. He was placed not at a table with Xiang-yun and Bao-qin, but on a special chair next to Grandmother Jia. He went round with Bao-chai, pouring a cup of wine for each of the guests on her behalf.

'Sit down now both of you,' commanded Grandmother Jia, 'and let's all have a drink. Later in the evening you can do your duty to everyone. But if you start getting all formal now and make everyone stand on ceremony,

you'll spoil my mood and take all the fun out of the party.'

They obeyed and sat down. Grandmother Jia turned to the others:

'For goodness' sake let's relax a bit. We only need one or two maids each to wait on us. Faithful, take Suncloud, Parrot, Aroma and Patience off to the back and have a cup of wine together.'

'But we still haven't kowtowed to Mrs Bao,' protested Faithful. 'How can we go and drink without having done that?'

'If I say so, then you can. Now, off with you!' ordered Grandmother Jia. 'We'll send for you later if we need you.'

Faithful and her fellow maids obeyed.

Grandmother Jia now pressed her guests to drink up. But she soon discovered that they were not at all their old party-going selves.

'What's the matter with you all?' she asked fretfully. 'Why can't everyone cheer up a bit?'

'We're eating and drinking,' replied Xiang-yun. 'What more do you expect of us?'

'When they were still children,' said Xi-feng, 'it was easy for them to be carefree and happy. Now that they're grown up, they're too self-conscious and well mannered to let themselves go. That's why they seem so dull.'

Bao-yu said confidentially to Grandmother Jia:

'It's best if we *don't* say anything, Grannie. If we so much as open our mouths we're bound to upset someone. Why don't you suggest a drinking game instead?'

Grandmother Jia had inclined her head to one side to listen to him.

'If it's to be a game,' she replied with a laugh, 'we'll have to call Faithful back!'

Bao-yu needed no second bidding, but went straight out to the rear of the apartment to find Faithful.

'Grandmother wants to play a game and needs your help.'

'Mr Bao, can't we relax and drink a cup of wine in peace? Do you *have* to invent ways of disturbing us?'

'It's nothing to do with *me*. Honestly. It's Grandmother. She sent me to fetch you.'

'Oh very well then,' said Faithful, resigning herself to her fate. 'You all stay here and drink your wine. I'll be back shortly.'

She set off to Grandmother Jia's apartment.

'There you are!' cried Grandmother Jia when she appeared. 'We're going to play a drinking game.'

'Mr Bao said you wanted me, Your Old Ladyship,' said Faithful, 'so I came straight away. What kind of game were you thinking of playing?'

'Well not one of those clever bookish ones, for a start. They're too boring. And not one of those rowdy ones either. Think of something new and entertaining for us.'

Faithful pondered for a moment:

'As Mrs Xue is one of our visitors, and seeing that she is an elderly lady and won't want to rack her brains too much, why don't we just get out the dice-bowl and throw for song-titles? The loser has to drink a cup of wine.'

'That sounds a good idea,' said Grandmother Jia. She told one of the maids to put the dice-bowl on the table.

'We'll throw four dice,' said Faithful. 'If the combination has no particular name, the thrower's forfeit is one cup of wine. If it does have a name, the number of cups the others have to drink will depend on the combination.'

'That sounds easy enough,' they replied. 'We'll follow your lead.'

Faithful threw two dice to determine who should start. They insisted that Faithful should drink a cup first herself, then counting from her they came to Aunt Xue, who threw, and came up with four ones.

'That has a name,' said Faithful. "'The Four Old Hermits of Mount Shang". All senior guests must drink a cup.'

Grandmother Jia, Mrs Li, Lady Xing and Lady Wang complied. Just as Grandmother Jia was raising her cup to her lips, Faithful said:

'Since that was Mrs Xue's throw, she must now think of a song-title to match it; and the person next to her must cap it with a line from "The Standard Poets". Forfeit for failure in either case is one cup.'

'This is a plot!' cried Aunt Xue. 'I don't stand a chance!'

‘Go on,’ Grandmother Jia encouraged her. ‘Have a go. You’ll spoil the fun if you back out. I’m next, and I’m sure to fail, so then we’ll be in the same boat.’

Aunt Xue tried her hand:

‘How’s this: “Greybeard sporting in the Flowers”?’

Grandmother Jia nodded, and recited the line:

“‘They deem it idle mimicry of youth...

The dice-bowl passed to Li Wen, who threw two ‘fours’ and two twos

‘That has a name too,’ said Faithful. “‘Two Travellers Lost in the Tiantai Mountains

Li Wen proposed the song-title ‘Two Scholars at Peach-blossom Spring’, and Li Wan, who was sitting next to her, recited the line:

“‘Searching for Peach-blossom Spring to flee the tyranny of Qin”.’

Everyone had a drink, and the dice-bowl passed to Grandmother J ia, who threw two twos and two ‘threes.

‘I suppose I shall have to drink a forfeit.’

‘No,’ said Faithful. ‘That has a name. “A Swallow over the River Guiding her Chicks”. Everyone has to drink a cup.’

‘Most of your chicks have flown the nest, haven’t they, Grannie?’ quipped Xi-feng.

They gave her a meaningful look, and she immediately fell silent. ‘Now what shall I say for my song?’ said Grandmother Jia. ‘What about “The Sire Leading his Grandson”?’

Li Qi was next to her, and quoted the line:

‘“Lazily watching the children catch willowfloss”.’

Everyone applauded her choice.

Bao-yu was longing to have a go, but so far the dice-bowl had not reached him. Now at last it was his turn. He threw a ‘two’, two ‘threes’ and a ‘one’.

‘What’s that?’ he asked.

Faithful laughed.

‘A dud! Drink a forfeit and throw again.’

Bao-yu did as he was told. This time he threw two ‘threes’ and two ‘fours’.

‘That’s better,’ said Faithful. ‘That’s “Zhang Chang Painting his Wife’s Eyebrows”.’

Bao-yu knew she was making fun of him, and Bao-chai blushed fiercely too. Xi-feng didn’t seem to have noticed anything out of the ordinary, and told him to hurry up and think of a song.

‘Then we’ll see whose turn it is next.’

Bao-yu was too embarrassed:

‘I’ll pay the forfeit. And there’s no one sitting next to me anyway.’

The bowl came next to Li Wan. She threw, and Faithful announced the name of the combination as ‘The Twelve Beauties’. Bao-yu hurried over to Li Wan’s side and studied the dice: the **red** and **green** pips were symmetrically paired.

‘Doesn’t that look pretty!’ he exclaimed.

Suddenly he recalled his dream, and the registers of the Twelve Beauties of Jinling. He wandered back to his seat in a daze.

‘In my dream they were twelve,’ he mused. ‘But of my fair cousins, most have been scattered to the four winds. Why have so few been spared?’

He gazed around him. Xiang-yan and Bao-chai were present that day, it was true; but the absence of Dai-yu struck him with a sudden and overwhelming force and he knew that he was about to burst into tears. Not wanting the others to witness his distress, he pretended to feel hot, and expressed a desire to go and change. He begged leave to ‘hand in his tally’ and left the party.

Xiang-yun noted his departure, and thought he was probably peeved by the fact that he had not had a good

throw and had been outshone by the others. She herself began to feel rather bored and irritated by the game.

'I can't think of anything,' said Li Wan, who had thrown the 'Twelve Beauties'. 'We are missing one of the party now anyway. I'd better just drink my forfeit and be done with it.'

'This game is not turning out to be much fun,' said Grandmother Jia. 'Why don't we call it a day? Let Faithful have one last throw.'

A junior maid placed the bowl in front of Faithful, who did as Grandmother Jia told her and threw the dice. She had two 'twos' and a 'five'. As the last dice continued to rattle in the dice-bowl, Faithful cried out:

'Pray I don't get another "five"!'

Finally it came to rest; there it was, five pips as plain as could be.

'Oh dear!' exclaimed Faithful. 'I've lost.'

'Doesn't that have a name?' asked Grandmother Jia.

'It does,' said Faithful. 'But I'll never be able to think of a song to match it.'

'Well, you tell us the name, and I'll try to think of something.'

'This one's called "Waves Sweep the Floating Duckweed".'

'There's nothing particularly hard about that,' said Grandmother Jia. 'Here's a song for you: "Autumn Fish in a Den of Caltrops".'

Xiang-yun, who was sitting next to Faithful, proposed the line:

'"The white duckweed moans, as autumn descends on the southern river."'

'Very apt!' they all exdaimed.

'The game's finished,' announced Grandmother Jia. 'Let's all have two more cups of wine and then eat our dirmer.'

She looked round and noticed that Bao-yu was still absent.

'Where's Ba~yu gone? Why isn't he back yet?' 'He went to change,' Faithful informed her. 'Who went with him?'

Oriole came forward:

'When I saw that Mr Bao was going out, I told Aroma to go with him.'

This set the ladies' minds at rest. They waited a little longer for him to return, and then, since there was still no sign of him, Lady Wang sent one of the junior maids out to look for him. The maid went to his new apartment, but the only person there was Fivey, setting out candles.

'Where's Mr Bao gone?' the maid asked her.

'He's over at Her Old Ladyship's for the party,' replied Fivey.

'No he's not. I've just come from there. Her Ladyship sent me to fetch him. She'd hardly do that if he was there in the first place.'

'Well, in that case, I don't know where he is. You'd better look somewhere else.'

The maid was obliged to return and on her way met Ripple.

'Did you see where Mr Bao went?'

'I'm looking for him too,' said Ripple. 'Her Ladyship and the others are waiting for him so that they can start dinner. Where *can* he have got to? You'd better hurry back and report to Her Old Ladyship. Don't say we can't find him, just say the wine didn't agree with him and he won't be having any dinner. Say he'll be over when he's had a little lie-down. Ask Her Old Ladyship and Their Ladyships to start without him.'

The junior maid carried Ripple's message to Pearl, who passed it on to Grandmother Jia.

'He doesn't usually eat much anyway,' commented the old lady. 'He may as well miss out on dinner then, and have a rest. Tell him he needn't come back at all today. His wife is here, and that will do.'

'Is that clear?' said Pearl to the junior maid.

'Yes, Miss Pearl,' said the maid, not daring to explain what had really happened. She went out and walked around for a bit, then returned, claiming to have conveyed the message to Bao-yu. No one took a great deal of

notice. They ate their dinner and then sat chatting.

*

Our narrative leaves them and returns to Bao-yu. Overwhelmed by a sudden sense of grief, he had quit the party and was wandering aimlessly outside. Aroma hurried after him and asked what the matter was.

'Nothing really,' he replied. 'I just feel very miserable all of a sudden. Why don't we go for a little stroll over to the apartment where Cousin Zhen's wife is living, and leave them to their drinking?'

'But Mrs Zhen is at the party,' said Aroma. 'Who do you want to visit in her apartment?'

'No one,' replied Bao-yu. 'I just thought I might drop in on her for a second. I'd forgotten she was at the party. I'd still like to go and see what sort of an apartment it is that she is living in.'

Aroma went along with him, and the two of them talked as they went. They soon came to You-shi's apartment, and noticed that the small side gate next to it leading into the Garden was half-ajar. Bao-yu did not go into You-shi's apartment at all; instead he went up to the two old serving-women in charge of the side gate, who were sitting there on the threshold having a conversation, and asked them:

'Is this side gate kept open?'

'Not usually,' replied one of them. 'But today we were told that Her Old Ladyship might be wanting some fruit from the Garden, so it's to be kept open in case.'

Bao-yu walked slowly up to the gate and, having confirmed for himself that it was open, made as if to go in; but Aroma held him back anxiously.

'You mustn't go in there. The Garden is haunted. It's been empty for ages. You might bump into something nasty like the others did!'

Bao-yu was tipsy enough to feel a little daring, and replied:

'I'm not afraid of such things!'

Aroma tugged at him with all her might and wouldn't let go. The serving-woman came up:

'Nowadays the Garden is ever so quiet and peaceful. Since the priests came and drove away the evil spirits, we often go in on our own to pick flowers and fruit. If Mr Bao wants to have a look, we'll go in with him. With so many of us, there's surely nothing to be afraid of.'

Bao-yu was delighted; and Aroma was obliged to abandon her attempts to dissuade him, and followed them in hersel£

As Bao-yu entered the Garden, a scene of utter desolation greeted his eyes whichever way he turned. The flowers and trees seemed every one to be wilting, to be more dead than alive, and the paint had long since started to peel from the walls of many of the buildings. In the distance he espied a thicket of bamboo, an isolated patch of brilliant **green** foliage.

Bao-yu contemplated the view for a moment.

'Ever since I fell ill and left the Garden,' he said, 'I've been living at Grannie's. It must be months since I've been here. What a wilderness it has become in that time! But look over there at that single clump of **green** bamboo that's doing so well - surely that's the Naiad's House?'

'You've been away too long,' said Aroma. 'You've lost your sense of direction. While we've been talking we've already walked past **Green** Delights. And look -' (she turned back and pointed) - *there's* the Naiad's House, over there!'

Bao-yu's eyes followed the direction of her pointing hand.

'If we've already passed it, then let's go back and have a look.'

'It's getting rather late now,' said Aroma. 'Her Old Ladyship will be waiting for you to start dinner. We'd better go back to the party.'

Bao-yu said nothing. He walked on, along the route he imagined he had trodden so many times in the past, and

began making his way towards his ‘Naiad’s House’. Percipient Reader, it will no doubt have surprised you to hear that Bao-yu had lost his way in the Garden after an absence of less than a year. The truth of the matter is that Bao-yu was quite correct in his orientation; it was Aroma who, anticipating his reaction to the sight of the Naiad’s House, had at first deliberately kept him occupied with conversation, and then when she saw him walking instinctively in that direction despite her efforts - heading, as she feared, straight into the arms of evil spirits -had tried to convince him that they had already walked past the place. Bao-yu’s heart was fixed, however; his compass was firmly set, and he was not to be so easily diverted.

He pressed ahead, and reluctantly Aroma followed. Suddenly he stood still. He seemed to be listening and watching.

‘What is it?’ asked Aroma.

‘Is there someone living there now?’ he asked.

‘I should hardly think so,’ she replied.

‘I could have sworn I heard someone weeping inside! There *must* be someone!’

‘You’re imagining things,’ said Aroma. ‘It’s because you always used to come here and find Miss Lin crying.’

Bao-yu was unconvinced and still wanted to approach and listen from a closer distance. The old women hurried forward:

‘It’s getting rather late now, sir. Time to be getting back. We’re not afraid of going anywhere else in the Garden, but just here the way is so dark and you never know... We’ve heard tell that since Miss Lin died they’re always hearing sounds of weeping here. No one will come near the place.’

Bao-yu and Aroma both started when they heard this.

‘You see! I told you!’ cried Bao-yu, the tears springing to his eyes. ‘Oh, Cousin Lin! Cousin Lin!’ he sobbed. ‘How could I have wounded you so! Please don’t reproach me! Don’t feel bitter towards me! It was my father and mother who made the choice. In my heart I was always true to you!’

With each word he became more and mote distraught, and finally broke into a great wail of grief. Aroma was wondering what on earth to do, when she saw Ripple hurrying towards her with a cohort of serving-women.

‘Are you quite out of your mind!’ cried Ripple. ‘Bringing Mr Bao here of all places! Her Old Ladyship and Her Ladyship are dreadfully worried and have sent everywhere to look for him. Just now the women on the side gate said they’d seen the two of you come in here. Their Ladyships had the fright of their lives when they heard! They scolded me and told me to form a search party and come straight here. Hurry up now, we’d better be quick!’

Bao-yu was still sobbing pitifully, but Aroma and Ripple dragged him away, wiping the tears from his eyes and chiding him with a description of the anxiety his grandmother was suffering on his account. In the end he gave in and followed them back.

Aroma could imagine only too vividly how worried Grandmother Jia would be and she took Bao-yu straight back to the old lady’s apartment. None of the party had gone home; they were all there waiting for Bao-yu’s return.

‘Aroma!’ cried Grandmother Jia severely. ‘I thought you were a sensible girl. That’s why I’ve always trusted you with Bao-yu. How *could* you take him into the Garden? He’s only just beginning to get better, and a nasty experience might set him right back. And *then* where would we be?’

Aroma did not dare say a word in her own defence, but hung her head in shame. Bao-chai for her part was deeply shocked to see how pale Bao-yu seemed on his return. Bao-yu refused to watch Aroma take the blame, and spoke up on her behalf:

‘When we went in it was broad daylight, and there was nothing to be afraid of. I haven’t been for a walk in the Garden for such a long time, and today I’d had a little wine at the party and was feeling in the mood for a stroll. Why did you think I would have a nasty experience?’

At this last remark of his, Xi-feng, who had herself been so badly scared in the Garden, shuddered and said:

‘Bao, you shouldn’t be so reckless!’
‘It’s not recklessness,’ countered Xiang-yun. ‘It’s devotion. He probably went there to find the Hibiscus Fairy. Or maybe it was some other sprite…’
Bao-yu made no reply. Lady Wang seemed too agitated to speak. ‘So there wasn’t anything frightening in the Garden then?’ asked Grandmother Jia. ‘Well, don’t let’s talk about it any more. But in future, if you want to go walking there, you must at least take more people with you. If it hadn’t been for this little escapade of yours, our guests would have left long ago. Off you go now, all of you, and have a good night’s sleep. Come back early in the morning. Tomorrow I shall make up for today and see that you enjoy yourselves properly. And this time we won’t let *him* spoil things!’
They all said goodbye to Grandmother Jia and the party broke up. Aunt Xue stayed the night with Lady Wang, Xiang-yun with Grandmother Jia, while Ying-chun went to stay with Xi-chun. The others all returned to their respective apartments.
When Bao-yu reached home, he was still a picture of misery. Bao-chai knew the cause of his endless sighing, and deliberately turned a deaf ear to it. She was concerned however that if he continued like this he might fall into a serious depression and revert to his old idiocy. Going into the inner room she called Aroma aside and questioned her in detail about Bao-yu’s excursion in the Garden. To learn of Aroma’s response, you must read the next chapter.

CHAPTER 109

Fivey shares a vigil, and receives
affection meant for another
Ying-chun pays her debt to fate, and returns
to the Realm of Primordial Truth

Bao-chai, having extracted from Aroma a detailed account of what had happened in the Garden, feared that a fresh bout of grief might indeed cause Bao-yu to fall ill again. In an attempt to avert this she deliberately alluded to Dai-yu’s dying moments, in the course of an apparently casual conversation with Aroma.
‘Human beings have certain feelings towards each other while they are alive,’ she went on to say. ‘But after death a person enters a separate realm and becomes a different entity. Someone still alive may continue to be infatuated, but the dead person, the object of that feeling, will be quite oblivious of it. Besides, if Miss Lin has become a fairy, she must take a very dim view of lesser mortals and would hardly deign to mingle with them on this earthly plane. To start imagining such things is to invite trouble and to lay oneself open to possession by evil spirits.’
She was talking to Aroma, but her words were clearly intended for Bao-yu’s ears. Aroma realized this and replied in an appropriate vein:
‘Of course she’s not a fairy. It’s out of the question. If Miss Lin’s spirit *were* haunting the Garden, why has she never once appeared to me in a dream? She and I were good friends, after all. .
Bao-yu was listening from outside, and considered this idea of Aroma’s carefully:
‘It *is* strange! Since I first learned of Cousin Lin’s death, I’ve thought of her constantly, every day. But why have I never once seen her in my dreams? It must be because she’s in Heaven, and thinks me a dull earthling incapable of communicating on her exalted level. I know what I’ll do: tonight I’ll sleep here in the outer room. Perhaps since I’ve just returned from the Garden she will be more aware of my feelings, and will condescend to visit me this once in a dream. If she does, I must be sure to ask her where she has gone, so that I can make offerings to her regularly. If on the other hand it turns out that she is too pure for even a single dream-visit,

then I must try to put her out of my mind once and for all.'

Having made this resolution, he said aloud:

'I shall sleep out here tonight. You needn't be bothered on my account.'

Bao-chai did not try to oppose him directly, but cautioned him:

'Don't go having any foolish ideas. Didn't you see how worried Mother was when she heard that you'd been in the Garden? She could hardly speak for anxiety! You must be sensible and look after yourself. If you go and do something silly again and Grandmother finds out, it's us she'll blame for not taking proper care of you.'

'I wasn't being serious,' said Bao-yu. 'I'd just like to sit here for a while and then come in. You must be tired too. Go to sleep, don't wait up for me.'

Bao-chai thought he would probably come in later, and said with an air of affected nonchalance:

cry well then. I'm going to sleep. Aroma can look after you.'

This was exactly what Bao-yu had been hoping for. He waited until Bao-chai had gone to bed and then told Aroma and Musk to lay out his bedding. He sent one or the other of them in at frequent intervals to see if 'Mrs Bao was asleep yet or not'. Bao-chai pretended to be asleep, although in fact she was wide awake and remained so the entire night. Bao-yu was quite taken in, and said to Aroma:

'You and Musk can both go and sleep now. I'm not upset any more. If you don't believe me, stay here with me until I fall asleep and then go in. But I don't want to be disturbed later on in the night.'

Aroma stayed for a while, saw him into bed and made him some tea. Then she closed the door and retired to the inner room, where after finishing a few odd jobs, she lay down. She too only feigned sleep, and lay awake, ready to jump up if Bao-yu needed her outside.

Bao-yu dismissed the two serving-women on night-watch; and when he was alone he sat up very quietly, said a silent prayer and then lay down again. At first sleep eluded him, but gradually his mind grew more peaceful and eventually he nodded off and slept soundly the whole night through. When he awoke it was already broad daylight. He rubbed his eyes, sat up in bed and reflected. He had had a dreamless sleep. Nothing whatsoever had occurred. He sighed.

'As the poet once said,' he mused out loud:

'Since death's parting, slow and sad the year has been;
Even in my dreams, her soul has not been seen.'

Bao-chai, who in contrast to Bao-yu had not slept a wink all night, heard him recite these well-known lines from Bo Ju-yi's 'Song of Enduring Grief', and remarked:

'What a singularly inept quotation! If Gousin Lin were alive, she'd be cross with you again, for comparing *her* to Yang Gui-fei!'

Bao-yu was embarrassed that she had overheard him. He climbed out of bed and walked sheepishly into the inner room.

'I meant to come in last night,' he said. 'But somehow I lay down and fell fast asleep.'

'What difference does it make to me whether you came in or not?' said Bao-chai.

Aroma had not slept either, and hearing the two of them talking she hurried over at once to pour tea. At that moment a junior maid from Grandmother Jia's arrived.

'Did Mr Bao have a good night's sleep?' she asked. 'If so, then will he and Mrs Bao please call on Her Old Ladyship as soon as they have completed their toilet?'

'Please inform Her Old Ladyship,' replied Bao-chai, 'that Mr Bao slept extremely well and that we will both call presently.'

The maid departed with this message.

Bao-chai completed her toilet at once, and accompanied by Oriole and Aroma she went first to pay her

respects to Grandmother Jia. Then she called politely on Lady Wang and Xi-feng, before returning once more to Grandmother Jia's. Her mother had by now arrived.

'How was Bao-yu last night?' was what everyone wanted to know

'He went to sleep as soon as we got home,' Bao-chai informed them. 'He was fine.'

They were relieved to hear this and the conversation passed to various other topics. Presently a junior maid came in to say that Ying-chun was going home:

'Mr Sun sent someone to Lady Xing's to complain, and Her Ladyship sent word to Miss Xi-chun to say that Miss Ying-chun must not be detained, but should return at once. Miss Ying-chun is at Her Ladyship's now. She's very upset, and is crying. She will be coming over presently to say goodbye, ma'am.'

Grandmother Jia was greatly distressed.

'Why did fate have to bring together a sweet child like Ying and this monster Sun! She'll have to bear with it for the rest of her life. There's no way out for her, poor girl!'

As they were speaking, Ying-chun came in, her cheeks wet with tears. The family were still supposed to be celebrating Bao-chai's birthday, so she did her best not to cry as she made her farewells. Grandmother Jia knew that Ying-chun must not delay her departure and she did not try to detain her.

'You'd best be on your way,' she said. 'But please, however bad things are, try to look on the bright side! He's what he is and there is little you can do to change him. In a few days I'll send someone to invite you home again for another visit.'

'Oh Grannie!' sobbed Ying-chun. 'You've always loved me! But it's no good! I know I'll never come home again!'

She could contain herself no longer, and tears streamed down her cheeks.

'Come along now!'

They all did what they could to cheer her up:'Of course you'll come again! You should be thankful you're not at the other end of the world, like poor Tan. She has almost no chance whatsoever of coming home.'

This mention of Tan-chun only brought more tears to the eyes of Grandmother Jia and the ladies. Once again, the fact that it was Bao-chai's birthday induced one of them to try and strike a more optimistic note:

'Who knows: if peace is restored on the coast, Tan's father-in4aw may be transferred back to the capital, and then we shall be able to see her!'

'Of course!' everyone concurred.

Ying-chun had now to contain her grief as best she could and take her leave. They saw her out, and then returned to Grandmother Jia's, where the party continued for the rest of that day and into the evening. When they saw that the old lady was tired, they all went their separate ways home.

*

Aunt Xue, after bidding farewell to Grandmother Jia, went to have a talk with Bao-chai:

'Your brother has survived this year, and if he can only receive an Imperial pardon and have his sentence reduced, he may still be able to pay his fine and be set free. These past few years have been so unbearably lonely and wretched for me! I've been thinking, perhaps I should go ahead with your cousin Ke's wedding after all; what do you think?'

'You're anxious about it, aren't you, Mama?' replied Bao-chai. 'Pan's marriage turned out so badly, and you're worried that Ke's will be the same. Well, my advice is to go ahead. You know Xiu-yan's character, and have nothing to fear on that account. Life is very hard for her at present. Once she's married into our family, however poor we are, it's bound to be better for her than being totally dependent on others as she is now.'

'In that case,' said Aunt Xue, 'will you tell Lady Jia when you have a chance? I've no one at home, and I should like her to choose a lucky day for the wedding.'

'Just talk it over with Ke and choose a good day between you,' said Bao-chai. 'Then you can let Grandmother

and Aunt Xing know, and go ahead with the wedding. I'm sure Aunt Xing will be only too glad to be rid of Xiu-yan.'

'I heard today that Xiang-yun is going home,' said Aunt Xue. 'Lady Jia wants Bao-qin to stay on here with you for a few days. She will be marrying too, quite soon, so you should take the chance of having a good chat with her.'

'I will, Mama.'

Aunt Xue remained with her daughter a little longer, and then after saying goodbye to the others, went home.

*

Let us return to Bao-yu. When he found himself in his apartment again that evening, he pondered his experience of the night before. There was no denying the fact that Dai-yu had failed to appear to him in a dream. That meant one of two things: either she had indeed already become a fairy, and was holding herself aloof from intercourse with as coarse a being as himself; or else *he* was just being too impatient. He decided to give this second alternative the benefit of the doubt, and resolved to prolong his experiment a little.

'Somehow last night,' he said to Bao-chai, 'when I fell asleep outside, I had a sounder night's sleep than I usually do in the inner

room. I woke up feeling very calm and refreshed. I've been thinking, I should like to try it again for another couple of nights. But I suppose you and Aroma will object again...'

Early that morning when she had heard him reciting the poem, Bao-chai knew it was the memory of Dai-yu that had inspired it. She knew that this obsession of his was something mere words would never cure, and concluded that she might as well let him go ahead and spend the two nights outside, and thus be the agent of his own disenchantment. Anyway, the fact of the matter was that he *had* slept soundly the previous night. She had been awake herself, and knew.

'What nonsense!' she replied. 'Why should we object? If you want to sleep there, go ahead. Just don't have any foolish ideas. You'll only be laying yourself open to possession by evil spirits.'

Bao-yu laughed: 'Why ever should I do that?'

Aroma was opposed to the plan:

'I think you should sleep in the inner room. It's harder to look after you properly in the outer room. You might catch a chill or something.'

Before Bao-yu had time to reply, Bao-chai gave Aroma a meaningful look.

'Oh well,' said Aroma, taking the point, 'at least you should have someone with you to bring you a drink if you need one.'

Bao-yu laughed:

'Why not you?'

Aroma was embarrassed by this. She blushed fiercely and said nothing. Bao-chai knew that Aroma was too sensible nowadays for that sort of banter, and spoke on her behalf:

'Aroma is used to being with me now. I think she should stay here. Musk and Fivey can look after you. Besides, Aroma has spent all day traipsing about with me, and she's tired. She deserves a rest.'

Bao-yu smiled and walked out of the room.

Bao-chai told Musk and Fivey to make up his bed in the outer room.

'Sleep lightly,' she instructed them, 'and be ready to bring him a drink if he wants one.'

'We will, ma'am,' they replied, and went out, to find Bao-yu sitting bolt upright on the couch, eyes closed and palms together, like a monk in meditation. They did not dare say a word, but stood staring at him, with a smile on their faces. Bao-chai sent Aroma in to see if she was needed, and Aroma too found his posture highly comical.

'Time to sleep,' she whispered. 'What do you want to start meditating for at this hour of the night?'

Bao-yu opened his eyes and looked at her.

'You can all go to bed now,' he announced. 'I shall sit up for a little longer and then go to sleep.'

'Last night,' said Aroma, 'you kept Mrs Bao awake till morning. Surely you're not intending a repeat performance, are you?'

Bao-yu could see that if he did not go to sleep nobody else would either, and climbed into bed. Aroma gave Musk and Fivey a few final instructions, and then went back to the inner room to sleep, closing the door behind her.

Musk and Fivey sorted out their own bedding, and waited for Bao-yu to fall asleep before going to bed themselves. But he remained obstinately wide awake. Watching them make the beds, he found himself suddenly thinking of the time when Aroma had been away and Skybright and Musk had been left to look after him. It was on that occasion that Musk had gone out during the night and Skybright had tried to play a trick on her and give her a fright. She had been too lightly dressed, and had caught cold as a result; and it was this cold that eventually led to the illness from which she died. His mind was now completely taken up with memories of Skybright. Then suddenly he remembered how Xi-feng had once likened Fivey to Skybright - 'the spitting image' had been her words. Imperceptibly his old feelings towards Skybright began to transfer themselves to Fivey. He lay there pretending to be asleep, and furtively watching her. The more he watched her, the more the resemblance struck him, and the more he felt himself aroused. All was silent in the inner room; *they* must be asleep, he thought to himself. But he needed to discover if Musk was still awake. He called her name a couple of times, and there was no reply. Fivey heard, however:

'What do you want, Mr Bao?'

'I'd like to rinse my mouth.'

Fivey could see that Musk was asleep, so she hurriedly rose from her bed, trimmed the wick in the lamp again and took Bao-yu a cup of tea, carrying the spittoon in her other hand. She was in too much of a hurry to change, and had nothing but a little **pink** silk jacket over her pajamas. Her hair was loosely coiled on top of her head. Looking at her, Bao-yu could almost imagine Skybright come back from the dead. Suddenly he remembered Skybright's dying words: 'If I'd known in advance that it would be like this, I might have behaved rather differently...' He stared at Fivey in a besotted fashion, quite oblivious of the teacup in her outstretched hand.

Ever since the departure of Parfumée, Fivey had given up all idea of coming to serve at **Green** Delights; but then, when Xi-feng gave orders for her to be taken into Bao-yu's service, she was more excited about it than Bao-yu himself. To her surprise, after her arrival the generally distinguished and dignified manner in which Bao-chai and Aroma conducted themselves made a deep impression on her, and she found herself coming to respect and admire them greatly, whereas Bao-yu by contrast seemed to her to have degenerated into a complete idiot, and to be not half so handsome as he used to be. Besides she knew that Lady Wang had dismissed some of the maids for flirting with Bao-yu, and she therefore decided to dismiss any foolish and romantic notions she might previously have entertained concerning him. But now here *he* was, the simpleton, evidently taking a fancy to her (she knew nothing of the process by which his feelings for Skybright had been transferred to her).

Both her cheeks were burning. She did not dare say anything out loud, but whispered:

'Mr Bao, please go ahead and rinse your mouth!'

He smiled and took the cup in his hand. She could not tell whether he ever did rinse his mouth or not, as the next she knew he was giggling and asking her:

'Weren't you friends with Skybright?'

Fivey didn't understand what he was getting at.

'Of course. We were all of us on good terms.'

Bao-yu lowered his voice to a whisper:

'When Skybright was so very ill, I went to visit her. You were there, weren't you?'

Fivey smiled and nodded her head.
‘Did you hear her say anything?’ asked Bao-yu.
‘No,’ replied Fivey, shaking her head.
Bao-yu held Fivey’s hand. He seemed to be completely carried away. She blushed fiercely and her heart missed a beat.
‘Mr Bao!’ she whispered. ‘Whatever’s on your mind, just go ahead and say it. But please stop behaving like this.’
Bao-yu let go of her hand.
‘“If I’d known in advance that it would be like this, I might have behaved rather differently…” That’s what Skybright said. Surely you must have heard?’
It seemed quite plain to Fivey what manner of ‘different behaviour’ he had in mind. She felt she must protest:
‘If that’s what she said, she should have been ashamed of herself! No decent girl would suggest a thing like that!’
‘Don’t you start preaching at me too!’ snapped Bao-yu irritably. ‘I was thinking how like Skybright you looked - that’s the only reason I told you what she said. How dare you slander her!’
Fivey could no longer discern Bao-yu’s true intentions.
‘It’s late,’ she said. ‘You really should go to sleep and not sit up like this. You might catch cold. Didn’t you hear what Mrs Bao and Aroma said just now?’
‘I’m not cold,’ said Bao-yu. As he said this, it suddenly struck him that Fivey was most inadequately clad, and that *she* might catch a chill just as Skybright had done.
‘Why aren’t you wearing a proper robe?’ he asked her. ‘You called, and it sounded important,’ she replied. ‘I was hardly going to take time off to dress! I would have, mind you, if I’d kndwn you were going to keep me talking this long.’
Bao-yu handed Fivey the pale **blue** silken padded jacket that was lying on the bed, and told her to put it on. But she refused.
‘You keep it - I’m not cold. And anyway, I’ve a perfectly good robe of my own.’
She went across to her bed and put on a long robe. She listened out for a moment. Musk was sound asleep. She crossed slowly back to Bao-yu:
‘I thought you were supposed to be having a quiet night?’
Bao-yu smiled.
‘To tell you the truth, that was never my intention. Actually, I was hoping to meet a fairy...
His words strengthened her suspicions.
‘Who do you mean?’
‘I’ll tell you if you like,’ he replied. ‘But it’s a long story. You’d better come up here and sit next to me...
‘But you’re all tucked up in bed!’ she protested, blushing again and smiling coyly. ‘How can I possibly sit next to you?’
‘Why not? One night a year or two ago, when the weather was cold and Skybright stayed up to play a trick on Musk, I was afraid she was going to catch a chill, so I tucked her under my quilt to keep her warm. What’s wrong with it? People shouldn’t be so prudish.’
Fivey thought he was merely putting ideas into her head. She did not know that he sincerely meant every word he said. She contemplated her dilemma. She could hardly escape; and yet if she remained, it would be equally awkward for her to remain standing or to sit down beside him. She gave him a little glance and her face puckered into a smile:
‘Don’t say such silly things! People might hear. No wonder you have such a reputation. How can you still need to go flirting, with two such beautiful ladies as Mrs Bao and Aroma by your side! Don’t you ever suggest such a thing again, or I’ll report you to Mrs Bao. And then you’ll have cause to be ashamed!’

As she was speaking there was a sudden noise outside, which startled them both, and shortly afterwards Bao-chai could be heard coughing in the inner room. Bao-yu made a quick motion with his lips, and Fivey hurriedly extinguished the lamp and stole back to bed. In fact, earlier that evening, both Bao-chai and Aroma had gone straight to sleep, exhausted after their previous sleepless night and the day's exertions, and both of them had slept soundly through this conversation between Bao-yu and Fivey. It was the sudden noise in the courtyard that had woken them too. They listened for any further sound, but all was quiet. Bao-yu meanwhile lay down in bed again, and was thinking to himself:

'That noise must surely have been Cousin Lin! She came, and then, when she heard me talking with Fivey, she decided to give us both a fright.'

He lay there tossing and turning, a thousand wild fancies running through his head, and only nodded off some time after three in the morning.

Bao-yu's advances had left Fivey with a guilty conscience, and when Bao-chai coughed she feared that they had both been overheard, and lay awake worrying about it all night. Early the next morning she rose, and seeing Bao-yu still fast asleep, began quietly tidying the room. Musk was already awake.

'Why are you up so early?' she asked Fivey. 'Don't tell me you've been awake all night...'

This led Fivey to suspect that Musk had overheard them too. She smiled awkwardly and said nothing. Presently Bao-chai and Aroma got up, opened the door and came into the outer room, where they were greatly surprised to find Bao-yu still asleep. It puzzled them that he should have slept there so soundly on two consecutive nights.

When Bao-yu awoke and saw them all standing around him, he sat up at once and rubbed his eyes. He thought back over the night. No, there had still been no dream. He had met no one. He consoled himself with the words of the old saying:

> Fairies and mortals tread different paths,
> And ne'er the twain shall meet.

As he climbed slowly down from his bed, Fivey's words about Bao-chai and Aroma were still ringing in his ears: 'two such beautiful ladies'. Yes, she was right, he thought to himself, and proceeded to stare at Bao-chai. Bao-chai thought he was drifting into one of his brown studies, and felt certain it must be to do with Dai-yu again, though she still had not enquired whether his dream had been fruitful or not. She soon began to feel uncomfortable under his penetrating gaze, and finally asked:

'Well, did you meet a fairy last night or not?'

Bao-yu concluded from this that she must have overheard his tête-à-tête with Fivey. He gave a nervous little laugh and replied with feigned surprise:

'What do you mean?'

Fivey for her part was feeling more and more guilty and apprehensive, and silently observed Bao-chai's reaction. Bao-chai turned to her next and asked with a smile:

'Well, did Mr Bao talk in his sleep last night?'

At this Bao-yu, muttering some incoherent excuse, walked rather sheepishly from the room. Fivey blushed fiercely and replied as evasively as she could:

'He said something or other early in the night, but I didn't quite catch it. Something about "knowing in advance that things would be like this", and then something about "behaving rather differently". I couldn't understand what he was trying to say, so I just told him to go back to sleep. Then I fell asleep myself, and if he said any more I certainly didn't hear it.'

Bao-chai lowered her head in thought:

'Obviously something to do with Dai-yu. If I let him go on sleeping in the outer room he's bound to get more

and more of these weird ideas into his head, and who knows what strange apparitions and flower fairies we'll have then. It is his weakness for our sex that has always been his vulnerable spot. How can I win him over myself? Until I can do that, this will never stop.'

A fierce and somewhat unmaidenly blush came to her cheeks, and she walked back into the inner room in something of a fluster to do her toilet.

*

During the two-day birthday festivities, Grandmother Jia had over-eaten, and on the second evening she was a little off colour. The following day she had a painfully bloated feeling in her stomach, which Faithful wanted to report to Jia Zheng. But Grandmother Jia forbade her:

'I've just been a bit greedy over the past couple of days. A fast will soon put me right. Don't you go making a fuss.'

Consequently Faithful told no one.

*

That evening, when Bao-yu returned to his apartment and saw Bao-chai come in from paying her respects to Grandmother Jia and Lady Wang, he recalled the incident in the morning and blushed with shame. His embarrassment was evident to Bao-chai. For someone subject to such extremities of feeling (she thought to herself) the only remedy lay in the manipulation of those very feelings themselves.

'Will you be sleeping outside again tonight?' she asked.

Bao-yu did not seem keen to pursue the matter:

'I really don't mind one way or the other.'

Bao-chai could think of no suitable retort.

'What's that supposed to mean?' protested Aroma. 'I don't believe you really slept so soundly out there.

Fivey promptly leapt to Bao-yu's defence:

'Mr Bao had a very peaceful night, apart from talking in his sleep. I couldn't make head or tail of what he said, and it seemed best not to argue with him.'

'I shall sleep out there tonight,' announced Aroma, 'and we'll see if *I* talk in my sleep. You can go ahead and move Mr Bao's bedding back into the inner room.'

Bao-chai made no comment. Bao-yu was too full of remorse to object, and went along meekly with Aroma's plan. He was eager to make it up with Bao-chai, while her concern that too much introspection and grief would injure his health caused her to be especially tender towards him; she was quite deliberately trying to 'graft herself' on to the 'stem' of his affections, drawing him closer to her and usurping Dai-yu's place in his heart. When Aroma went to sleep in the outer room that evening, Bao-yu was in a frame of mind to exhibit his penitence, and Bao-chai naturally had no intention of rejecting him. As a result, their marriage was that night physically consummated for the first time, and they tasted to the full the joys of nuptial intercourse. From this union Bao-chai conceived a child. But that belongs to a later part of our story.

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When Bao-chai and Bao-yu rose in the morning, Bao-yu performed his ablutions and went ahead to call on Grandmother Jia. She had that very morning had a sudden fancy to give something to her darling grandson and to her devoted granddaughter4n-law, and had told Faithful to open one of her trunks and take out an antique Han dynasty jade thumb-ring, a family heirloom of hers. She knew it could not compare with Bao-yu's original jade, but thought nevertheless that it would make rather an unusual pendant. Faithful found it and handed it to Grandmother Jia.

'I don't think I've ever seen this before. How could you remember so clearly where it was after all these years?

You knew exactly which casket and which trunk. With your instructions I was able to find it straight away. What do you want it for, ma'am?'

'I wouldn't expect you to know about this ring,' replied Grandmother Jia. 'It was originally given to my father by my great-grandfather, and then when I was married my father sent for me and made me a present of it. He told me it was a very precious thumb-ring made in the Han dynasty, of the variety known as "broken circle". He wanted me to keep it as a memento. I was very young at the time and didn't think much of it; I just put it away in a trunk. And when I came to live here, and saw so many other treasures around me, it
didn't seem so very special. I've never even worn it. It must have been lying in that trunk for over sixty years. I was thinking today what a good grandson Bao-yu is to me; and since he has lost his own jade, I thought I might give this to him, just as my father gave it to me.'

Presently Bao-yu arrived to pay his respects.

'Come here,' said Grandmother Jia with a twinkle in her eye. 'Come and have a look at something.'

Bao-yu walked over to the couch where she was lying, and Grandmother Jia handed him the jade thumb-ring. He took it in his hands and inspected it. It was about three inches in circumference, slightly elliptical in shape like an elongated melon, of a reddish hue. It was a very beautiful piece of workmanship. Bao-yu was most taken with it and enthused at some length.

'Do you like it?' said Grandmother Jia. 'This was handed down to me from my great-grandpa, and now I'm passing it on to you.'

Bao-yu smiled, and dropping one knee to the ground to express his thanks, said he would like to go and show the ring to his mother.

'When she sees it she will tell your father,' Grandmother Jia teased him, 'and then *he* will say that I love you more than I ever loved him. They have never even set eyes on it before.'

Bao-yu smiled and went out, leaving Bao-chai to stay for a while and chat with Grandmother Jia before taking her leave.

The old lady fasted for two days, but she still had a painfully bloated stomach, and began to cough and have dizzy spells. The ladies found her in good spirits when they paid their duty calls, but they sent a message to Jia Zheng that she was indisposed. He came immediately, and on leaving her apartment sent at once for a doctor to take her pulses and give a diagnosis. The doctor came presently and after a consultation pronounced that the condition was nothing unusual for a person of Grandmother Jia's age. Faulty diet had caused a slight chill, which a little dispersant medication would soon put right. He wrote out a prescription, and Jia Zheng, seeing that it contained nothing out of the ordinary, told one of the maids to brew the ingredients up and administer the decoction to Grandmother Jia.

Jia Zheng visited Grandmother Jia morning and evening. After three days, when there was still no sign of improvement, he said to Jia Lian:

'You must get in touch with a better doctor and ask him to come and look at your grandmother as soon as possible. I'm afraid none of our regular doctors is good enough.'

Jia Lian thought for a moment:

'I remember a while ago when Bao-yu was ill, we ended up calling in a doctor who was not strictly speaking a regular practitioner at all- and yet he was the one to put Bao-yu right. Why don't we send for him again?'

'Medicine is certainly a subtle art" Jia Zheng mused aloud. 'And sometimes the ablest physicians are not recognized as such. By all means send someone to fetch this man.'

Jia Lian departed at once, only to return with the news that the doctor in question had recently left town to instruct his disciples and would not be coming back for another ten days. As the matter was urgent, Jia Lian had invited another, who was already on his way. Jia Zheng waited anxiously for this doctor's arrival.

During this illness, all the ladies were in constant attendance on Grandmother Jia. On one occasion, when there was quite a gathering of them in her apartment, one of the old women whose duty it was to watch the side gate

of the Garden came in with a message.
'Sister Adamantina from **Green** Bower Hermitage in the Garden has heard that Her Old Ladyship is ill, and has come specially to call.'
'She so rarely visits,' they commented. 'Go and invite her in at once.
Xi-feng went over to the bedside to tell Grandmother Jia, and Xiu-yan, Adamantina's old friend, went Out to meet her. Adamantina was wearing the head-covering of an unshorn nun, and a pale **blue** plain silk gown with a patchwork full-length sleeveless jacket over it, bordered with black silk; she had gathered her gown with a russet-**green** woven sash, beneath which she wore a long white damask-silk skirt decorated with a pattern in grey. She drifted in with her usual otherworldly air, holding a fly whisk and fingering a rosary, and followed by one of her attendants. Xiu-yan greeted her:
'When I lived in the Garden too, I could come and see you often; but recently the Garden's become so deserted, and it's been difficult for me to go in there on my own. And anyway the side gate is usually closed. That's why I haven't been able to visit you for so long. How lovely it is to see you again!'
'You and the others were always too caught up in the hustle and bustle of life,' replied Adamatina. 'That's why even when you lived in the Garden I didn't visit very often. But I've heard of the recent troubles, and learned that Her Old Ladyship has fallen ill; I've been thinking of you and I wanted to see Bao-chai. What difference does it make to me if the gates are closed or not? I chose to come, and I came; if I hadn't chosen to come, it would have made no difference how much anybody wanted me to.'
Xiu-yan laughed.
'You haven't changed a bit, have you!'
By now they had entered Grandmother Jia's room. The ladies all welcomed Adamantina, and she went up to the bedside, enquired after the old lady's health and chatted with her for a while.
'You're a religious person,' said the old lady. 'Tell me: am I going to get better or not?'
'A person as charitable and virtuous as yourself, Lady Jia, will surely live to a ripe old age,' replied Adamantina. 'You've just caught a slight chill, and I'm sure a few doses of medicine will put it right. At your age the important thing is to relax and not worry so much.'
'But you know I'm not the worrying type,' said Grandmother Jia. 'I've always been one for my bit of fun. There's not much the matter with me, I just feel a little uncomfortable and have this bloated feeling in my stomach. The last doctor I saw said it was because I was letting myself get too overwrought. But you know perfectly well that no one dares to rub *me* up the wrong way! I don't think that doctor really knew what he was talking about. I told Lian the first doctor was right - I've just got an upset stomach and a cold. Lian should send for him again tomorrow.'
She called Faithful Over:
'Tell the kitchen to prepare some vegetables so that Sister Adamantina can have something to eat while she's here.'
'I've already eaten,' said Adamantina. 'I won't have anything now.'
'Even if you are not going to eat,' said Lady Wang, 'stay and chat with us a little.'
'Very well. It's so long since I've been here. I wanted to see how you all were anyway.'
She talked with them a little longer, and then said she must be going. As she looked around she caught sight of Xi-chun.
'Why are you looking so thin, Xi?' she asked. 'You mustn't wear yourself out so with your painting.'
'I haven't painted for ages,' said Xi-chun. 'The room I'm living in now is not so light. And besides I don't feel like painting nowadays.'
'Where are you living now?' asked Adamantina.
'In a room to the east of the gate you've just come through,' replied Xi-chun. 'It's very close, if you ever feel like dropping in.'

‘One day I will,’ replied Adamantina. ‘When I’m feeling in the right frame of mind.’

Xi-chun and the others saw her out, chatting as they went. By the time they returned, the maids informed them that the doctor was closeted with Grandmother Jia, and they all left and went their separate ways.

Contrary to everyone’s cheerful prognostications, Grandmother Jia gradually deteriorated. None of the treatment she received had any beneficial effect, and she started suffering from diarrhoea. Jia Zheng realized that her condition was becoming critical, and grew extremely concerned. He sent a messenger to the Board to say that he would be taking leave and staying at home, and he and Lady Wang waited on the old lady day and night, personally preparing and administering her medicines. One day they had just watched her eat and drink a little and were feeling slightly more optimistic, when they saw an old serving-woman poke her head round the door. Lady Wang sent Suncloud Out to see who it was, and she discovered it to be one of the women Ying-chun had taken with her on her marriage.

‘What have you come for?’ she asked.

‘I’ve been waiting an age!’ replied the old woman. ‘I couldn’t find a maid anywhere and I didn’t want to come barging in. I’ve been worried silly!’

‘What’s the trouble?’ asked Suncloud. ‘Don’t tell me Mr Sun has been bullying our Miss Ying again!’

‘She’s past hope!’ said the old woman. ‘He had one of his fits the day before yesterday, and she was crying all that night, and then yesterday she had a bad attack and could hardly breathe. They wouldn’t send for a doctor, and today she’s even worse!’

‘Her Old Ladyship’s ill herself!’ said Suncloud. ‘For goodness’ sake don’t go making a lot of noise!’

Lady Wang had heard this conversation from inside, and afraid that Grandmother Jia would react badly to this latest turn of events, she ordered Suncloud to take the serving-woman away and talk to her somewhere else. But Grandmother Jia still had her wits sufficiently about her to overhear and understand a great part of the conversation.

‘Is Ying dying?’ she cried.

‘Certainly not,’ protested Lady Wang. ‘These women lose all sense of proportion. She’s just been a little poorly these past few days and they were concerned for her and came here to ask for a doctor.’

‘They’d better have mine,’ said Grandmother Jia. ‘Tell him to go and see her at once.’

Grandmother Jia began to grow very distressed.

‘Of my three granddaughters,’ she said, ‘the eldest spent her share of good fortune and died; Tan, my third, is married and has gone to live at the other end of the world, and I shall never see her again; and now Ying - I knew life was hard for her, but somehow I thought she would live to see better days. Now she’s going to die, and she’s so dreadfully young! And I shall be left here, a useless old woman with no reason to be alive!’

Lady Wang and Faithful did what they could to console her. Baochai and Li Wan were not present that day, and Xi-feng had been too ill to attend for several days. Lady Wang was afraid that Grandmother Jia’s illness would be aggravated by all this mental distress, and she sent at once for the other ladies, while she returned to her own apartment and called Suncloud to her.

‘That stupid old serving-woman!’ she grumbled. ‘In future when I’m with Her Old Ladyship, you’re not to disturb me, no matter what the trouble is!’

Suncloud promised to obey this injunction, and said no more. The old woman meanwhile had just reached Lady Xing’s when the news arrived that Ying-chun had died. Lady Xing burst into tears. In Jia She’s absence she had to send Jia Lian to the Suns to represent the family. Grandmother Jia was so ill that no one dared break the news to her.

Alas! What a cruel end for such a gentle creature, her flowerlike beauty crushed within a year of marriage!

None of the Jias could leave home with Grandmother Jia as she was, and the Suns gave Ying-chun a predictably makeshift funeral.

Grandmother Jia continued to deteriorate steadily, but still her only thought was for her granddaughters and

great-nieces. On one occasion Xiang-yun was in the forefront of her mind, and she sent a maid to see how she was. The maid returned and tiptoed in to find Faithful. Faithful was at the bedside, as were Lady Wang and the other ladies; and the maid, not wishing to disturb them, went round to the back to find Amber.

'Her Old Ladyship sent me to fetch news of Miss Xiang-yun,' she told Amber, 'and I found her crying her heart out! Her husband has suddenly been taken ill, and the doctors say there's no hope for him. At the best it will turn into a consumption and he may last another four or five years! You can imagine how badly Miss Xiang-yun has taken it! She's already heard about Her Old Ladyship's illness, but now she simply can't leave home. She told me not to mention her husband's illness to Her Old Ladyship. If she does ask after Miss Xiang-yun, you must think of some way to explain her absence.'

Amber heaved a deep sigh, and after a long silence dismissed the maid. She too thought it unwise to inform Grandmother Jia, and went to her bedside with the intention of telling Faithful to invent some story. She found Grandmother Jia deathly pale, and everyone in the room whispering among themselves:

'You can see she's going!'

Amber did not dare utter a word. Jia Zheng discreetly called Jia Lian over to whisper something in his ear, and Jia Lian tiptoed off to do his bidding. Outside he assembled the remaining household staff.

'Her Old Ladyship will soon be gone. You must make sure that everything is in order. First fetch out the coffin-boards for inspection, and measure them up for a lining. Go round all the apartments, take everyone's measurements, and give the tailor a complete list, with instructions to make everyone a set of mourning clothes. Arrange for the funeral awning to be constructed in the courtyard and for coffin-bearers to be hired. And have extra staff put on duty in the kitchen.'

'Mr Lian,' replied Lai Da, on behalf of the others. 'You don't need to worry about these things. We have already thought of everything. But where is the money coming from?'

'We won't need to borrow,' said Jia Lian. 'Her Old Ladyship has made provision herself. The Master told me just now that he wants no expense spared. It must be done in style; we must put on a good show.'

'Yes, sir.'

Lai Da and the others went about their business at once, and Jia Lian returned to his own apartment.

'How is Mrs Lian?' he asked Patience.

Patience shot her mouth out towards the inner room:

'Go and see for yourself.'

Jia Lian went in. Xi-feng was struggling to dress herself, but was too weak to do so. She had collapsed on the kang, and was leaning on the little kang-table.

'It's no good hoping to snatch some rest now!' exclaimed Jia Lian. 'Grandmother is sinking fast and you must be there. Hurry up and tell them to tidy things up in here. And pull yourself together! If the worst happens, we won't be able to get away for quite a while.'

'We've got nothing left to tidy up!' said Xi-feng bitterly. 'Only a few odds and ends, nothing worth bothering about. You go on ahead, Sir Zheng may want you. I'll come as soon as I'm properly dressed.'

J ia Lian returned to Grandmother Jia's apartment and reported discreetly to Jia Zheng that all had been seen to and the various duties assigned. Jia Zheng nodded. The Imperial Physician was announced, and Jia Lian went out to receive him. Grandmother Jia's pulses were taken and then the physician emerged to inform Jia Lian in hushed tones:

'Lady Jia's pulse-rate is very poor. You must be prepared for the worst.'

Jia Lian understood and passed the message on to Lady Wang and the others. Lady Wang beckoned Faithful with a meaningful glance and told her to prepare Grandmother Jia's funeral clothes. Faithful went to fetch them.

The old lady opened her eyes and asked for a drink of tea. Lady Xing brought her a cup of ginseng tea, and she put her lips to it.

‘Not this!’ she protested. ‘Give me a proper cup of tea!’
They dared not deny her this request, and promptly brought her a cup of real tea. She took one gulp, and then another, and then announced that she wanted to sit up.
‘Mother,’ pleaded Jia Zheng on behalf of the others, ‘whatever you want, you have only to tell us; but please don’t exhaust yourself by trying to sit up.’
‘I’ve had a drink and I feel a bit better now,’ she replied. ‘I’d like to sit up and chat for a bit.’
Pearl and the other maids gently supported her with their hands. She seemed momentarily revived. Whether she was to live or die will be told in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 110

Lady Jia ends her days, and returns
to the land of shades
Wang Xi-feng exhausts her strength, and
forfeits the family’s esteem

Grandmother Jia sat up in bed and began to speak:
‘I have been part of the Jia family for over sixty years. I have had a long life and enjoyed my full share of happiness. I think I can say that all my children and grandchildren from Zheng downwards have turned out well. As for Bao-yu: I have loved him so dearly and…’
Her eyes searched the room for Bao-yu, and Lady Wang pushed him towards the bed. Grandmother Jia extended one hand from beneath the bedcovers and took hold of him:
‘My boy, you must promise to do your very best for the family!’
‘Yes, Grandma,’ choked Bao-yu, his eyes brimming with tears. He struggled to contain his weeping and stood listening to her, as she continued:
‘I want to see one of my great-grandchildren, and then I think I can set my heart at rest. Where’s my little Lan?’
Li Wan pushed Lan forwards. Grandmother Jia let go of Bao-yu and took Lan by the hand.
‘You must be a good boy and always do your duty to your mother. And when you’re grown up, you must win her honour and glory! Now, where’s Fengie?’
Xi-feng was standing by the side of the bed and hurried round to face Grandmother Jia.
‘Here I am, Grandma.’
‘My child,’ said Grandmother Jia, ‘your trouble is that you’re too clever! Try to be more charitable in future and to make your peace with fate, I know I’m not much of a one to talk; the most I’ve done in my life is try to be honest and to bear my misfortunes with patience. I’ve never been the sort for fasting or prayer. The only good work I ever did was to have those copies of the Diamond Sutra made a year or so ago. I wonder if they’ve all been distributed yet?’
Xi-feng informed her that the copies had not yet been distributed.
‘The sooner that act of devotion is completed the better,’ said the old lady. ‘I know my elder son She and Cousin Zhen are detained in exile, and cannot be here: but how could that little devil Xiang-yun be so heartless? Why has she not come to see me?’
Faithful and her fellow maids knew the reason only too well, but said nothing.
Grandmother Jia looked next at Bao-chai. As she did so, she sighed and a flush began to spread across her face.

Jia Zheng knew this to be a sign of imminent death. He came forward with the ginseng broth, but Grandmother Jia's teeth were already tightly clenched. She closed her eyes, then opened them once more and gazed round the entire room. Lady Wang and Bao-chai came forward and supported her gently, while Lady Xing and Xi-feng dressed her. The old serving-woman prepared the bed where she was to be laid out, and arranged the coverlet. There was a faint rattle in her throat, a smile stole across her face, and she was gone. She was eighty-two years old. The serving-women hurried forward to lay her on the bed.

Jia Zheng and the other menfolk knelt in the outer room, Lady Xing and the womenfolk knelt by the bed; from both rose the first chorus of lamentation. The servants outside had all made their preparations, and as soon as word came from the inner quarters, every gateway was thrown open, from the main entrance to the inner gate leading to the ladies' apartments, and white paper was pasted on every door. The funeral awning was raised over the courtyard, and a memorial archway erected outside the main entrance. Every member of the household immediately put on their mourning clothes.

Jia Zheng reported his bereavement and the commencement of his three-year period of mourning to the Board of Rites, who submitted a memorial requesting the Emperor's instructions in the matter. His Majesty, being a person of the profoundest compassion and kindliness, in consideration of the services rendered and distinctions obtained by previous generations of the family, and especially in view of the relationship of the deceased to the Imperial Jia Concubine, authorized a bounty of one thousand taels of silver and instructed officers from the Board of Rites to make offerings and do reverence before her coffin. Jia household servants were despatched to notify all relatives and family friends of Lady Jia's death, and they all came to condole; for while they knew that the Jias had come down in the world, they also saw that the family continued to enjoy the Emperor's favour. An auspicious day was chosen for the encoffinment and subsequent lying-in-state.

Since Jia She was away from home, Jia Zheng was acting head of the family. Two of Grandmother Jia's grandsons, Bao-yu and Jia Huan, and her great-grandson Jia Lan, all of whom were too young to take part in the reception, mourned by the coffin. Her other grandson, Jia Lian, was busy organizing the servants, with the help of Jia Rong and various male and female relatives. Ladies Xing and Wang, Li Wan, Xi-feng and Bao-chai were supposed to be chief mourners and therefore in constant attendance on the coffin. Strictly speaking, one of the other ladies had to be chosen to orchestrate the reception. There were three immediate possibilities: there was You-shi, who ever since Cousin Zhen's departure and her installation in Rong-guo House as a dependant bad kept very much in the background, and was anyway unfamiliar with the workings of this side of the family; there was Jia Rong's new wife, who was even less confident of her abilities in this respect; and there was Xi-chun, who was still too young, and though she had grown up with the Rong-guo branch had remained totally ignorant of family practicalities. None of these was really a plausible candidate.

The Only person for the job was Xi-feng. With Jia Lian in charge of the 'outside', it would make good sense for her to run the 'inside' and look after the lady guests. She had always had great confidence in herself in the past and had assumed that Grandmother Jia's funeral would be the culmination of her career, an opportunity for her to prove how indispensable she was. Ladies Xing and Wang remembered how well she had coped with Qin Ke-qing's funeral, and thought they could rely on her to repeat her success. When therefore they absolved her from her duties as a mourner and asked her to take over full responsibility as manageress once more, she could hardly refuse.

'After all,' she thought to herself, 'I've always been in charge here. The servants are used to taking orders from me. It was Lady Xing's servants and You-shi's who were hard to handle before, and they've all gone. It will be less convenient settling bills without tallies, but I shall have cash available from Grandmother's fund, so there should be no problem. It will help having Lian in charge of his side of the reception, too. Even though I'm not well, I think I should be able to

get by without discrediting mysel£ It's bound to be easier than Qin Ke-qing's funeral.'

She waited until the morning after the Third Day, during which ceremonies were held welcoming back the

spirit of the deceased. Then she told Zhou Rui's wife to summon a general assembly of the staff and to bring the registers. When she scrutinized them, she found that altogether there were only twenty-one men, nineteen serving-women, and a dozen or so maids. It would not be enough.

'Why, we have fewer servants for Lady Jia's funeral than we had for Qin Ke-qing's!' she thought to herself with dismay. Even after calling in extra hands from the country estates, there would still be a serious shortage.

She was turning this problem over in her mind when one of the junior maids came in:

'Miss Faithful would like you to go over and see her, Mrs Lian.'

Somewhat reluctantly Xi-feng went over to Grandmother Jia's apartment, where she found Faithful in floods of tears. The moment she saw Xi-feng, she clutched hold of her and cried:

'Please be seated, Mrs Lian, and let me kowtow to you! I know one shouldn't do such things during a period of mourning, but I really *must!'*

Faithful fell to her knees, and Xi-feng held out her hands to prevent her.

'Come on! What's the meaning of all this? If you've something on your mind, then just go ahead and say it!'

Faithful insisted on kneeling, and Xi-feng continued her attempts to pull her to her feet.

'Her Old Ladyship's funeral has been placed entirely in your hands and Mr Lian's,' sobbed Faithful. 'Her Old Ladyship left a special sum of money to pay for it. While she was alive, Her Old Ladyship never wasted a penny on herself; now that the time has come for her funeral, I beg you, ma'am, to do the right thing by her and give her a proper send-off! Just now I heard the Master talking about it "The Book of Songs this", and "Confucius that" - I didn't understand a word of what he said. I caught one sentence, though: "In funerals, sincere grief is of more importance than outward show." I asked Mrs Bao to explain what he meant, and she said that the Master wants to keep the funeral a simple affair. He believes that heart-felt grief is the truest form of devotion, and that there is no need for extravagant display. But as I see it, for someone like Her Old Ladyship, things *ought* to be a bit grand. I know I'm only a servant, and have no right to speak in these matters, but I feel that Her Old Ladyship loved us both during her lifetime, ma'am, both you and me, and now that she's dead we *owe* it to her to send her off with a bit of style! I know how good you are at that sort of thing, ma'am, and I wanted to ask for your support, so that we could decide together what's best. I've been with Her Old Ladyship all my life, and death cannot part us! If I don't see this done properly, how am I ever to look her in the face again?'

Xi-feng found Faithful's way of talking rather odd.

'Don't you worry,' she replied. 'Of course everything will be done in proper style. Sir Zheng may talk of economy, but we have certain standards to maintain. We'll spend every penny of the money on Lady Jia, if need be.'

'Before she died,' said Faithful, 'Her Old Ladyship said that everything left over after the family distribution had been made was to be given to us. If there's not enough money for the funeral expenses, ma'am, then take our share of Her Old Ladyship's belongings and pawn them. Whatever the Master may say, he can hardly go against Her Old Ladyship's last wishes. He was here himself when she divided everything up.'

'You've always been such a sensible girl,' said Xi-feng. 'What's got into you today?'

'Nothing's got into me,' protested Faithful. 'I just know that Lady Xing doesn't care, and that the Master is being too cautious. It may be that you are of the same mind as the Master, ma'am. If you're afraid too, and think that a proper funeral will get us into trouble, then no one will dare to give Her Old Ladyship her due. That would be the most terrible thing! I'm only a maid, so of course it's no personal concern of mine. But think what a disgrace it would be for the family!'

'I hardly need reminding of that,' replied Xi-feng. 'Set your mind at rest. I shall take care of everything.'

Faithful once more entreated Xi-feng to do her utmost, and pledged her undying gratitude.

'What a strange creature!' thought Xi-feng to herself, as she left Grandmother Jia's apartment. 'I wonder what can be in her mind? Of course she's right: Grannie's funeral should be stylish. Oh dear! I

can't pay too much attention to Faithful's complaints. I'd better just stick to the book and follow family precedent.'

She summoned Brightie's wife, and sent her with a message to Jia Lian, asking him to come and see her.

'What do you want me for?' he asked, when he arrived shortly afterwards. 'Just keep your end up on the "inside". There should be no problems. If you're in any doubt, stick to Uncle Zheng's instructions.

'There you are,' said Xi-feng. 'What you say only bears out Faithful's fears.'

'What fears are they?'

Xi-feng repeated the substance of her interview with Faithful. 'Who cares what the maids say?' retorted Jia Lian. 'I've just been in to see Uncle Zheng, and this is what *he* said: "We'd like to lay on something grand for Mother's funeral, but although some people will understand that it's her money we're using, less well-informed observers may suspect us of secretly holding on to some of our own resources. They may think we still possess hidden wealth. Of course," Uncle Zheng went on to say to me, "if we don't spend all of Grandmother's money on the funeral, no one will want to appropriate what's left for their own personal use. In one way or another it should still be spent on Grandmother. Now she was a Southerner, and though we have ancestral burial4and in the South, there are no buildings on it. When her coffin has been transported to the South, with any money that's left over we can put up some buildings on the ancestral burial-ground, and buy a few hectares of land to provide for the sacrifices. If we ever return to the South ourselves, it will come in handy, and even if we don't, we can always let some of the poorer clan members live on it. They can keep up the seasonal offerings and sweep the graves at regular intervals." That was Uncle Zheng's proposal. Don't you think it a sound one? You're surely not suggesting that we spend the entire amount on the funeral, are you?'

'Has any of the money been issued yet?' asked Xi-feng. 'Not a penny of it,' replied Jia Lian. 'I heard that when Mother learned of this proposal of Uncle Zheng's, she sang its praises and did her utmost to encourage both him and Aunt Wang in their efforts to economize. So what can I do? I already have several hundred taels owing for the awning and the pall-bearers' fees, but the cash still hasn't been issued. If I go and ask for it, they'll all tell me the money's there but that I must get the work finished first and reckon up afterwards. There's no one we can borrow from: the servants with any money of their own have all disappeared. When I called a roll, some were "absent sick", others were "in the country", while the ones still here have stayed on only out of sheer necessity and are no use to us. They're interested only in making a profit for themselves.'

Xi-feng was lost in thought for a moment.

'How *are* we going to manage, then?' she said finally.

As she was speaking a maid came into the room:

'There's a message for you from Lady Xing, ma'am. Today is the third day of the ladies' reception, and the arrangements are still topsy-turvy. The guests should not have to be kept waiting for their food, after the funeral offering has been made! They had to ask for their meal several times before they were served. And even when the main dishes arrived, there was still no rice. Surely we can do better than that!'

Xi-feng hurried in to give the servants orders to serve lunch, and they managed to produce something passable. Unfortunately there was an unusually large crowd of guests that day and the staff were at their most sullen and apathetic. Xi-feng had to supervise them herself, then she hurried out and told Brightie's wife to call a general meeting of all the serving-women. She gave each one clear instructions, to which they replied with a surly, 'Yes, Mrs Lian,' and proceeded to do nothing during the afternoon.

'Look how late it is! Why haven't you served the evening offering and meal yet?' demanded Xi-feng.

'Serving the food would be no problem, ma'am,' came the reply, 'if we had the necessary utensils ..'

'Fools!' exclaimed Xi-feng. 'This is your job! Of course you'll get whatever you need!'

The servants reluctantly applied themselves to their 'impossible' tasks, while Xi-feng went straight to the main apartment to seek Ladies Xing and Wang's permission for the necessary utensils. But there was still such a throng of guests around them that it was impossible for her to get a word in. Evening was drawing on, and in

despair she went to see Faithful and asked her for the use of Grandmother Jia's spare dinner service.

'Why come asking *me* for it?' exclaimed Faithful. 'Mr Lian pawned it a couple of years ago! You'd better ask him if he ever redeemed it.'

'I don't want the silver or gold,' said Xi-feng. 'The regular service will do.'

'What do you suppose Lady Xing and Mrs You have been using since they moved in?' asked Faithful pointedly.

Xi-feng knew she must be telling the truth, and left at once for Lady Wang's apartment, where she managed to talk Silver and Suncloud into lending her a service, had a quick inventory made by Sunshine, and told him to hand the things over to the servants.

Faithful saw Xi-feng in this state of disarray, and although she did not call her back to complain, she thought to herself:

'Why is Mrs Lan, who used to be so capable, bungling things so badly this time? The past couple of days have been a disgrace. It's poor gratitude for Her Old Ladyship's love!'

She was not aware that Lady Xing was deliberately starving Xi-feng of funds. Jia Zheng's views on economy coincided neatly with Lady Xing's own anxieties about the future, and she saw every tael saved on the funeral as a contribution not only to the family's reserves, but also to her own financial security. Her position in this was strengthened by the fact that strictly speaking it was Grandmother Jia's eldest son who should have been in charge of the funeral. Jia She was not at home, but Jia Zheng was an incorrigible stickler for convention, and whenever consulted would reply: 'Ask Lady Xing what she thinks.' Lady Xing considered Xi-feng extravagant and Jia Lian untrustworthy, and consequently held tightly on to every penny of the funeral funds. Faithful however took it for granted that the money for the funeral had already been issued, and ascribing the present crisis to a lack of zeal and loyalty on Xi-feng's part, she redoubled her wailing before the coffin of her dead mistress.

Lady Xing and Lady Wang knew only too well what Faithful was complaining about, but so far from acknowledging that the cause lay in their own refusal to equip Xi-feng properly for her task, they began criticizing Xi-feng out loud:

'Faithful is right: Feng is letting us down badly...'

In the evening, Lady Wang summoned Xi-feng and rebuked her:

'We may be living in somewhat straitened circumstances, but we must maintain our standards none the less. During the past two or three days I've noticed that the maids have not been looking after our guests properly. Clearly you have failed to give them adequate instructions. Please will you make more of an effort and show a little more family spirit.'

Xi-feng was speechless. She would have brought up the fact that she had not been issued with any money, but money was supposed to be Jia Lian's province, whereas Lady Wang was complaining about the 'inside' service. She dared not answer back.

'Strictly speaking,' said Lady Xing, who was standing to one side, 'your Aunt Wang and I, as Lady Jia's daughters-in-law, should be taking care of the reception, not a member of the junior generation; but we're very tied up with the mourning, and that is why we delegated the responsibility to you. You mustn't think you can be slack.'

Xi-feng blushed fiercely. She was about to say something in her own defence when she heard a drum begin outside: it was time for the dusk offering of paper money. A wail rose from the assembled mourners and her chance to speak had gone. She thought she would wait till later, but after the offering Lady Wang urged her to hurry about her duties.

'We can take care of things here. You go and see to it that everything is in order for tomorrow.'

Xi-feng did not dare utter a word, but went out, containing her chagrin and her tears as best she could. She called another meeting of the staff and reminded them once more of their duties:

‘Ladies, dears, take pity on me I beg you! I am being blamed for everything by Their Ladyships, and it’s all because you are not doing your jobs properly. You are making a laughing stock of us. I beseech you to make a special effort tomorrow.’

‘But madam,’ came the reply, ‘this isn’t the first time you’ve been in charge. You know us, we’d never dare disobey your orders. But this time the ladies are asking *too* much. Take this last meal: some wanted to eat here, others wanted to eat in their own rooms. We ask Lady So-and-so to come and take her meal, and then Mrs Somebody-else doesn’t turn up ... How can we possibly cope? We beg you, ma’am, to have a word with the maids and ask them not to be so fussy!’

‘Her Old Ladyship’s maids are very hard to please,’ replied Xi-feng. ‘And it’s hard for me to give orders to Their Ladyships’ maids. Who is there I *can* speak to?

‘But Mrs Lian! When you managed the funeral for Ning-guo House, you had people beaten, you scolded them, you took a very strong line - and everyone obeyed you. Are you going to let your authority be challenged now by these *maids?*’

‘On that occasion,’ sighed Xi-feng. ‘Their Ladyships were in no position to find fault with me. But this time it’s not Ning-guo House; [‘m on home territory, and open to public scrutiny. So everyone’s finding fault with me. Besides, I’m not getting money when I ask for it from accounts. If something is needed at the reception, and I send out for it and nothing happens, what can I do?’

‘But Mr Lian’s in charge of that side of things. Surely he’ll give you whatever money you need?’

‘That’s what *you* think!’ replied Xi-feng. ‘His hands are just as tied as mine. He has no control over the money. He has to ask for every penny himself. He’s got no cash at all.’

‘But isn’t Her Old Ladyship’s money his to use?’

‘Ask the stewards,’ said Xi-feng. ‘They’ll tell you.’

‘No wonder the menservants outside are complaining! They keep saying what a big job it is, what hard work, and that there’s no chance of making anything on the side. How can things possibly run smoothly when there’s no money?’

‘Enough talking,’ said Xi-feng. ‘All of you concentrate on your jobs and do them as best you can. If I hear any more complaints from Their Ladyships, I’ll be after you.’

‘We’ll do whatever you tell us to do, ma’am, we’ll not say a word. But with all their different ideas, it will be hard to satisfy every one of the ladies.’

Xi-feng implored them:

‘My dears! Help me Out tomorrow, please! Give me a chance to talk things over properly with the maids, and we’ll discuss the matter again.’

The servants went about their business.

Xi-feng felt bitterly wronged, and the more she thought about the situation she was placed in, the more pent-up she became.

At first light, after a sleepless night, she had to report once more for duty to Ladies Xing and Wang. She would have liked to discipline the maids, but was afraid of arousing Lady Xing’s resentment; she would have liked to confide in Lady Wang, but Lady Xing had already set Lady Wang against her. The maids, seeing that Their Ladyships were not supporting Xi-feng, started to make life harder for her than ever. The only exception was Patience, who stood loyally by Xi-feng.

‘Mrs Lian would like to do things properly,’ she explained to the others, in an attempt to win them over. ‘But Sir Zheng and Their Ladyships have given orders for strict economy to he observed, and there’s nothing she can do about it.’

Buddhist sutras were read, Taoist masses were celebrated, there was an endless stream of ritual lamentations and sacrifices to the spirit of the departed; but somehow, in the prevailing climate of retrenchment, the mourners did not fully throw themselves into things, and the ritual had a rather perfunctory air about it. Each

day saw the arrival of princely consorts and ladies of high rank, none of whom Xi-feng could receive in person as she was too busy trying to keep things going below-decks. She had no sooner mobilized one servant, when another was found to be missing; she lost her temper, she begged; she muddled through one session, and then had to cope with a fresh set of problems. By now Faithful was not the only one to see that things were awry. Even Xi-feng herself knew, to her great mortification, that the funeral reception was a shambles.

Though Lady Xing was wife of the elder son of the deceased, she was able to justify her own indifference towards the practical arrangements with the handy text: 'Grief is the Essence of Devotion.' Lady Wang followed suit, as did all the other ladies of the family - with the single exception of Li Wan. She saw the difficulties Xi-feng was having, and though she did not dare speak up on her behalf, she sighed to herself and thought:

'There's a popular saying: "The Peony owes much of its beauty to its leaves." Mother and Aunt Xing have always relied on Xi-feng; but how can she help them, when the servants no longer obey her? If Tan were at home, she could help. But as things are, even Xi-feng's own servants are running round in circles and muttering behind her back, complaining that there's no profit in it for them and that they're just making fools of themselves. Father is a great believer in filial piety; but he doesn't understand the practicalities. In something big like a funeral, you have to spend money if you want things done properly. Poor Feng! After all these years, who would have thought she would come to grief over Grandmother's funeral!'

When an opportunity presented itself, Li Wan spoke to her own servants:

'Now don't you go treating Mrs Lian disrespectfully just because everyone else is. Don't imagine it's enough for a funeral if people dress in mourning and keep the wake. Don't think a few days of muddling through like that will suffice. If you see the others in difficulties, you must lend a hand. This is a family concern. Everyone should do their best to help.'

Li Wan's trusted servants replied:

'You are quite right, ma'am. We wouldn't dream of going against Mrs Lian. But Faithful and the others seemed to be blaming her...'

'I've already spoken to Faithful,' said Li Wan. 'I've told her that it's not Mrs Lian's fault, Mrs Lian is doing all she can to give Her Old Ladyship a proper funeral. But she isn't getting the money. How can the cleverest daughter-in-law in the world make congee without rice? Faithful knows the truth now, and she doesn't hold Mrs Lian to blame any longer. Mind you, Faithful's behaving quite strangely, I must say, she's not at all her usual self While Her Old Ladyship was still alive to love and protect her, she never put on airs, but now that Her Old Ladyship is dead and her support is gone, she seems to be acting in a most peculiar fashion. I felt sorry for her before. She should thank her lucky stars that Sir She is away from home, and that she's escaped *that* fate. If he were here, her future really would look grim.'

As she was speaking, Jia Lan came in.

'It's time you went to bed, Mama,' he said. 'The guests have been coming and going all day, and you must be worn out. It's time you had a rest. I haven't looked at my books at all these past few days. Today Grandmother said I can sleep at home. I'm so pleased, as it means I shall be able to do some work. Otherwise, by the time the mourning period is over, I shall have forgotten everything.'

'You're such a good boy!' said his mother. 'Of course you're right to study. But today you should rest too. Wait until the procession's over, then you can get down to your books again.'

'If you're going to sleep,' replied Jia Lan, 'I'll go to bed too, and do some revision in bed.'

The servants were loud in his praises:

'What a wonderful boy! So young, but so keen to make the most of the slightest opportunity to study! Not like his uncle. Mr Bao may be a married man, but he's still as childish as ever. To see him these last few days, kneeling down in there with Sir Zheng - so awkward and wretched, itching for Sir Zheng to get up so that *he* could dash off to find Mrs Bao and start whispering to her about goodness knows what. Mrs Bao wouldn't pay

him any attention so he went and pestered Miss Bao-qin, and she avoided him, and Miss Xiu-yan wouldn't talk to him either, and in the end Miss Xi-luan and Miss Si-jie were the only ones who *would*. *They* hung on his every word. It seems Mr Bao still has only one interest in life: fooling about with the young ladies. There's not a shred of gratitude in him for the way Her Old Ladyship loved him all those years. He's not a patch on Master Lan! You certainly have no cause to worry for the future, Mrs Zhu!'

'He may be a good boy,' commented Li Wan, 'but he's still so young. By the time he's grown up, who knows what will have become of the family? Tell me, how has young Master Huan been behaving?'

'Oh, he's a regular disgrace!' replied one of the servants. 'A right little rascal, forever poking his nose into other people's affairs and sneaking around the place. Even when he is supposed to be mourning, the moment one of the young ladies arrives, he starts peeping out from behind the screens.'

'Huan's getting quite grown up now,' said Li Wan. 'The other day I heard something about his being engaged. But it had to be put off because of the funeral. Now, no more gossiping: in such a big family as ours, with so much going on, we'll never be able to set everything to rights. There was one other thing I wanted to ask you. Have carriages been arranged for the funeral procession the day after tomorrow?'

'Mrs Lian has been so busy these past few days,' came the reply. 'She's been in a terrible state. So far as we know, she hasn't given any instructions about carriages yet. Yesterday we heard one of the men saying that Mr Lian has put Mr Qiang in charge of that. Apparently we haven't enough carriages or drivers ourselves, and they're planning to borrow from relations.'

Li Wan smiled sadly:

'Are they sure our relations will agree to lend?'

'You must be joking, ma'am! Of course they'd lend us their carriages. The trouble is, they may all be using their own for the funeral, so it looks as if we may have to end up hiring all the same.'

'We can hire carriages for the servants. But will we be able to find decent white funeral carriages for Their Ladyships?' said Li Wan.

'Lady Xing and both Mrs You and Mrs Rong from Ning-guo House are all without carriages of their own. How are they going to come if we don't hire?'

Li Wan sighed.

'I remember the day when we thought it a joke to see one of our relatives riding in a hired carriage! Now they'll be laughing at us. Tomorrow you must tell your menfolk to make sure our carriages and horses are prepared well in advance. We don't want any last-minute panics.'

'Yes, ma'am.'

Li Wan's servants went about their business.

*

Our story now turns to Shi Xiang-yun. Earlier, because of her husband's illness, she had only been able to come once to mourn for Grandmother Jia. She calculated now that there were two days left before the funeral procession was due to set off; and since her husband's condition had been positively diagnosed as a consumption, and he was therefore in no immediate danger, she decided she must call once more. She came on the day before the final wake. She recalled all Grandmother Jia's love for her, and then her thoughts turned to her own fate, to have married such a fine husband, a man of such grace and talent, of such a gentle disposition, only to watch him being taken from her slowly and inexorably by an illness whose roots must surely lie in some previous lifetime. She wept with renewed grief for most of that night, despite the persistent efforts of Faithful and the other maids to console her.

Bao-yu was unbearably distressed by the sight of Xiang-yun's weeping, but could hardly go to comfort her in the midst of the ceremonial lamentations. The plain mourning-clothes she was wearing and the absence of any make-up seemed to make her even prettier than before her marriage. He looked round at Bao-qin and the other

girls; they too were plainly dressed, with a minimum of ornamentation. The very simplicity lent a charm and grace to their appearance. His eyes rested on Bao-chai: how well mourning-clothes became her! She looked even more attractive than in her everyday attire.

'The men of old,' mused Bao-yu to himself, 'used to say that of all flowers none could rival the splendour of plum-blossom, not for its early blooming but for the incomparable purity of its whiteness, the unsurpassable freshness and delicacy of its scent. If only Cousin Lin were here now, and dressed in a simple mourning gown, how exquisitely beautiful *she* would look!'

He felt a pang of grief, tears rolled down his cheeks, and he began sobbing loudly and unrestrainedly. It was a funeral after all, and no one would think such behaviour out of place. The ladies were already busy rallying Xiang-yun when suddenly they heard another familiar voice break out wailing on the outside of the screen. They surmised that both cousins were overwhelmed by memories of Grandmother Jia's past love and kindness, and little guessed that Xiang-yun and Bao-yu each had private cause for grief. Their heart-felt lamentations soon brought tears to everyone's eyes, and it fell to Aunt Xue and old Mrs Li to offer comfort and counsel moderation.

The following day was the wake proper, and therefore busier than ever. Xi-feng was utterly exhausted, but there was nothing for it, she had to struggle on and muddle her way through the morning, even though she had by now lost her voice. By the afternoon, when the number of guests reached its peak and demands were being made on her from all quarters, she had reached breaking point and was searching in desperation for some second wind when a young maid came running in:

'*Here* you are, ma'am! No wonder Lady Xing is so cross! "So many guests," she said. "I can't possibly take care of them. Where is Mrs Lian? Hiding somewhere with her feet up, I'll be bound!"'

This unmerited rebuke provoked a sudden surge of indignation within Xi-feng. She struggled to control herself, but tears started to her eyes, and all went black before her. A sickly taste rose into her mouth and she began to vomit up quantities of bright **red** blood. The strength ebbed from her legs and she sank to the ground. Luckily Patience was at hand and hurried over to support her mistress as she crouched there, blood gushing from her mouth in an unstaunchable stream.

To learn if she survived this crisis or not, you must turn to the next chapter.

CHAPTER 111

A devoted maid renders a final service, and accompanies
her mistress to the Great Void
A villainous slave takes his revenge, and betrays
his masters into the hands of thieves

Patience hurried forward, and with the help of another maid she raised Xi-feng from the ground and gently escorted her to her room. There she laid her down with great care on the kang and told **Crimson** to bring a cup of hot water and hold it to her lips. Xi-feng drank a sip of the water and then sank into a heavy sleep. Autumn came briefly into the room, glanced at her lying there, and walked out again. Patience did not ask her to stay, but turned instead to Felicity who was standing at her side and said:

'Go and tell Their Ladyships at once.'

Felicity informed Ladies Xing and Wang that Xi-feng had vomited blood and would be unable to continue with her duties. Lady Xing suspected Xi-feng of malingering, but refrained from expressing her suspicions in front of her female relatives.

‘Tell Mrs Lian to go and lie down then,’ she said.

No one made any further comment. That evening an endless stream of family and friends came to call, and only thanks to the help of a few close relations could a semblance of normality be maintained. Xi-feng’s absence was the cue for many of the staff to give up working altogether, and little now stood between Rong-guo House and total chaos.

At ten o’clock in the evening, when those guests who lived a long way off had departed, the family began to prepare for the wake, and a chorus of lamentation rose from the womenfolk gathered within the funeral screen. Faithful wept herself into a faint, and had to be propped up and given a vigorous pummelling. When she came round, all she could say was:

‘Her Old Ladyship was always so good to me! I want to go with her!’

Her words were not taken seriously, but were considered a natural, if rather hyperbolic, expression of her grief. Later, when the time came for the wake proper, and over a hundred family and servants were gathered together for the ritual, Faithful was nowhere to be seen, and in the general flurry of activity no one bothered to check where she was. The turn came for Amber and Grandmother Jia’s other maids to lament and make their offering, and they would have looked for Faithful then to join them, but thought she had probably worn herself out with weeping and gone to lie down somewhere, and decided to let her be.

When the ritual was over, Jia Zheng told Jia Lian to ensure that all was ready for the funeral cortege, and discussed with him who was to look after the house in the family’s absence.

‘I’ve told Yun to stay at home and take charge,’ said Jia Lian. ‘And Steward Lin and his family will stay behind as well and supervise the dismantling of the awning. I still don’t know which of the ladies should be left in charge of the inner apartments.’

‘I heard your mother say that Xi-feng was ill and wouldn’t be going,’ replied Jia Zheng. ‘So she will be staying at home anyway. And Cousin Zhen’s wife suggested that, as she is so seriously ill, Xi-feng should have Xi-chun and a few maids and serving-women to keep her company. Between them they can keep an eye on Grand-mother’s apartments.’

Jia Lian had his reservations about this proposal.

‘You-shi doesn’t like Xi-chun,’ he thought to himself, ‘and is deliberately preventing her from going on the procession. But Xi-chun can’t take charge on her own. And Xi-feng is too sick to be of any help.’

‘You should go and rest now, Uncle,’ he said to Jia Zheng. ‘I’ll report back to you when I’ve had a word with Mother.’

Jia Zheng nodded, and Jia Lian went in to Lady Xing’s apartment.

Earlier in the evening, Faithful had wandered off on her own, brooding tearfully to herself:

‘All my life I’ve lived with Her Old Ladyship, and now that she’s dead I’ve nowhere to turn. Sir She is not at home, that’s something to be thankful for, but I don’t like the way Lady Xing is behaving. Sir Zheng will never intervene on my behalf, and one way or another the future looks very bleak. The young masters will all be trying to get their way. We shall each of us be dealt with as they think fit, some kept for their beds, some married to their page-boys... Well, I for one won’t stand for it! I’d rather die! But *how?* That’s the question …’

She had made her way towards Grandmother Jia’s inner room. From the threshold she detected a faint form in the dim lamplight within, a lady with a sash in her hand, poised as if in the very act of hanging herself from a beam. Faithful was not in the least frightened.

‘Who can this be?’ she asked herself. ‘Someone bent on the same course as myself, but with greater resolve ...’

‘Who are you?’ she said aloud. ‘We seem to have the same thought! Let us die together!’

There was no reply. Faithful walked a little closer and could see now that it was not one of the maids from Grandmother Jia’s apartment. She looked more carefully. A chill breeze blew past her, and the lady’s form vanished into thin air. Faithful stood there for a moment longer in a daze, then walked back into the outer room and sat down on the edge of the kang, lost in thought. Suddenly she exclaimed:

‘Of course! That’s who it was! Mr Rong’s first wife, from Ning-guo House. But she died long ago. What was she doing here? I suppose she must have come to fetch me. But why was she going through the motions of hanging herself?’

After a few moments’ thought:

‘That’s it! She was showing me *how!*’

With this realization, the evil had entered the very marrow of her being, and her resolve was formed at last. She rose to her feet as if in a trance and went to her toilet box, opening it and weeping all the while. She took out the lock of hair that she had once cut from her head, and slipped it inside the bosom of her dress. She untied the sash from around her waist and looped one end of it over the beam where Qin Ke-qing had just stood. Then she gave herself up to one last fit of weeping. Hearing the guests leave in the distance, and fearing that someone might come in and surprise her before the deed was done, she quickly pulled the door to and fetched a footstool. Standing on the stool, she tied a slip-knot in the sash, put her head through the knot and kicked the stool away. Alas! The last breath was soon strangled from her throat, and her gentle soul fled its mortal frame.

The wandering soul was still uncertain whither to proceed when it saw once more the faint form of Qin Ke-qing standing before it. ‘Mrs Rong!’ it cried, advancing urgently towards the apparition. ‘Wait for me!’

‘I am not Mrs Rong,’ came the reply. ‘I am Disenchantment’s younger sister, Ke-qing.’

‘But you’re most definitely Mrs Rong,’ protested Faithful. ‘How can you deny it?’

‘Listen,’ replied the other. ‘I will tell you the true story of all this, and then you will surely understand. I once occupied the highest seat in Disenchantment’s Tribunal of Love. My responsibility was the settlement of Debts of Passion. I went down into the human world, where naturally I was destined to become the world’s foremost lover, my mission being to draw lovesick lads and lovelorn maidens with all speed back to the tribunal and the settlement of their debts. As part of this mission it was my Karma to hang myself. I have now seen through the illusion of mortal attachment, and have risen above the Sea of Passion to return to the Paradise of Love. This leaves a vacancy in the Land of Illusion, in the Department of Fond Infatuation. You have been chosen by Disenchantment to take my place, and I have been sent to guide you there.’

‘But I am a most unpassionate person!’ protested Faithful. ‘How can I be considered a lover?’

‘You don’t understand,’ replied the other. ‘Earthlings treat lust and love as one and the same thing. By this means they practise all manner of lechery and immorality, and pass it off as “harmless romance”. They do not understand the true meaning of the word “love”. Before the emotions of pleasure, anger, grief and joy stir within the human breast, there exists the “natural state” of love; the stirring of these emotions causes passion. *Our* kind of love, yours and mine, is the former, natural state. It is like a bud. Once open, it ceases to be true love.’

Faithful’s soul signalled understanding with a nod, and followed Qin Ke-qing.

When the wake was over, Ladies Xing and Wang began giving instructions to those of the servants who were staying behind to look after the house, and Amber went in search of Faithful to ask her whether their carriages had been hired for the next day. She looked in vain in the outer room of Grandmother Jia’s apartment, and then she noticed that the door to the inner room was on the latch, and

putting her eye to the crack peered through into the half-lit interior. A flickering lamp filled the room with eerie shadows. No sound could be heard from inside and she retraced her steps, saying to herself:

‘Where can the wretched girl have disappeared to?’

On her way out she bumped into Pearl.

‘Have you seen Faithful?’ she asked.

‘No,’ replied Pearl. ‘I’ve been looking myself. Their Ladyships want to speak to her. Most probably she’s fallen asleep in the inner room.’

‘I’ve just had a look - she didn’t *seem* to be there,’ said Amber. ‘The lamp needs trimming, and it’s awfully

dark and spooky inside. I didn't actually go inside. Shall we go in together and look properly?'
The two maids entered the room. First they trimmed the lamp.
'Who put this footstool here?' exclaimed Pearl. 'I nearly tripped over it.'
As she spoke she looked upwards and let out a horrified cry.
'Ai)o!' She fell back and collided with Amber, who looked up in turn, screamed and stood rooted to the spot. Their cries were soon heard, and other maids came running into the room. There were more shrieks of horror, and word was sent at once to Ladies Xing and Wang.
When Lady Wang and Bao-chai heard the news, they both burst into tears and set off to Grandmother Jia's apartment to see for themselves.
'I never thought Faithful had it in her to do this!' exclaimed Lady Xing. 'Send someone at once to inform Sir Zheng.'
Bao-yu stood dumbfounded, an expression of glazed horror in his eyes. Aroma and his other maids rallied him: 'Cry if you must, but don't bottle it up like this!'
Finally he managed to emit a piercing wail.
'What a rare girl Faithful was to ch6ose such a death!' he had been thinking to himself. 'The purest essence of the universe is truly concentrated in her sex! She has found a fitting and noble death. We, Grandmother's own grandchildren, are despicable by comparison. We have shown ourselves less devoted than her maid.'
He found something strangely comforting in this thought, and by the time Bao-chai had come to his side to soothe his tears, he was smiling again.
'Oh dear!' cried Aroma. 'Mr Bao's going mad again!'
'It's nothing to worry about,' Bao-chai reassured her. 'No doubt he has his reasons.'
Bao-yu was pleased to hear Bao-chai say this.
'Perhaps she really *does* understand me,' he thought to himsel£ 'If so, she is the only one.'
He was drifting off into some other fantastic reverie when Jia Zheng arrived.
'Faithful is a commendable child!' exclaimed Jia Zheng with a sincere sigh of admiration. 'Lady Jia's love for her was not in vain!'
He turned to Jia Lian:
'Send someone to buy her a coffin, and lay her in it this very night. Tomorrow her remains can be conveyed together with Mother's, and her coffin can lie in state behind that of her mistress. In this way her noble act can be carried to a fitting conclusion.'
Jia Lian went out to execute these instructions, and gave orders for Faithful's body to be let down and laid out in Grandmother Jia's inner room.
When Patience heard the news of Faithful's suicide, she came with Oriole and a whole crowd of other maids and they all wept bitterly before Faithful's body. The occasion caused Nightingale to think of her own future and the precariousness of her present situation, and she regretted that she herself had not chosen Faithful's path and followed Dai-yu to the grave. By so doing she would at least have fulfilled her duty as a maid and died a noble death. In Bao-yu's apartment she was doing little more than marking time. Although he was very considerate and affectionate towards her, she knew that nothing would ever come of it. All these thoughts added a note of personal grief to her lamentations.
Lady Wang sent at once for Faithful's sister-in-law. She told her to supervise the encoffinment, and after consulting with Lady Xing, issued her an allowance of one hundred taels (from Grandmother Jia's fund). She also promised to sort out all Faithful's private effects and give them to her as soon as she had time. The sister-in-law kowtowed, and so far from exhibiting any signs of grief, seemed rather pleased.
'What wonderful courage Faithful showed!' she exclaimed. 'And what a lucky girl she is, to have won such glory, and such a splendid funeral into the bargain!'
One of the serving-women nearby rebuked her:

‘That’s quite enough from you! A hundred taels is a poor bargain for your own sister-in4aw’s life! Think how much *more* profit you’d have made out of her if you’d only managed to flog her earlier on to Sir She! Then you’d have had something to crow about!’

The words struck home, and Faithful’s sister-in4aw departed blushing. At the inner gate she met Steward Lin with a team of men carrying in the coffin and returned with them, helping them lay Faithful’s corpse in the coffin, and herself putting on a show of mourning.

Since Faithful had died in the best Confucian tradition, ‘Out of devotion to her mistress’, Jia Zheng sent for incense and himself lit three joss-sticks before her coffin.

‘For her loyalty and devotion,’ he said, having made a solemn bow, ‘she deserves to be elevated above the rank of a mere maid. The younger generation must pay homage to her.’

Bao-yu’s delight knew no bounds. He came forward and with almost exaggerated reverence performed a series of full-blown kowtows. Jia Lian also recalled Faithful’s past kindnesses to him, and would have followed suit, but Lady Xing restrained him:

‘One of the masters is quite enough. Too much of this might ruin her chances of being born again...’

Jia Lian desisted. But Bao-chai felt uneasy at Lady Xing’s words. ‘Strictly speaking, I shouldn’t kowtow to her,’ she said. ‘But this is a special case. We are all of us too bound by our commitments to the living to give in to any extreme display of grief. But Faithful has acted for us. She has given the fullest expression to *our* devotion, and now we should ask her to continue serving Grandmother in the next world on our behalf That would at least be a small token of our love!’

She walked forward on Oriole’s arm and poured a libation of wine before Faithful’s coffin, the tears streaming in profusion down her cheeks. When the libation was completed, she kowtowed several times in succession and sobbed emotionally. Some of the assembled company commented wryly that now Bao-yu and his wife were both demented; others protested that their conduct evinced a sincere grief; while some restricted themselves to observing that they had at least manifested a sense of what was right and proper. Jia Zheng, for his part, was pleased with them.

He had by now settled the caretaking arrangements, and it was agreed that Xi-feng and Xi-chun would stay behind, while all the other ladies would take part in the procession. No one slept a great deal that night.

At four in the morning, the cortege could be heard gathering outside, and by seven it was ready to move off, with Jia Zheng at the head, in full mourning attire and weeping profusely, as the rites demanded of a filial son. The street was lined with the funeral booths of countless families, which need not be described in detail here. At last they reached the Temple of the Iron Threshold and the coffins were set out, while the menfolk in mourning prepared to spend the night at the temple.

*

At home, Steward Lin supervised the dismantling of the funeral awning, carefully bolted the doors and put up the shutters on the windows, swept the courtyard and appointed wardens for the night-watch, to commence their duties that evening. It was a well-established rule at Rong-guo House that the innermost gate was closed at ten, and after that hour entrance to the inner apartments was strictly forbidden to males. Female domestics kept the watch inside. Xi-feng, despite a night’s rest, had still not recovered from her attack, and although she seemed a little more composed, she was certainly not capable of getting about. Patience and Xi-chun therefore undertook a tour of inspection, and gave the women on night-watch their instructions before retiring to their separate apartments.

*

Our narrative turns at this point to Zhou Rui's foster-son, He San --who, it may be remembered, had been flogged and expelled from Rong-guo House by Cousin Zhen the previous year for fighting with his fellow-servant, Bao Er, and had since then spent most of his time in the gambling-dens. With Grandmother Jia's death, He San thought there might be a possibility of reinstatement, or at least a job of some kind in the offing for him, and he made enquiries at Rong-guo House several days in succession. Finally it became clear that he was engaged on a futile quest, and heaving many a disgruntled sigh he made his way back to one of his usual haunts, and slumped into a chair. His cronies noticed his depressed air and called out to him:

'San, old mate, why not have another fling? Who knows, your luck might turn.'

'I'd love to!' exclaimed He San bitterly. 'But I haven't a penny left to play with.'

'Come off it! After all the time you've been away at your old Pa Zhou's place? You must have fixed yourself up all right! Don't come the beggar on us!'

'That's what you think! Oh, they've got plenty - millions in fact -but they're keeping it all tucked away. They won't spend it. They'll bang on to it and hang on to it and in the end it will take a fire or a thief to make them let go!'

'You can't expect us to believe they're *that* rich, after what they had confiscated in that raid?'

'You don't realize,' replied He San. 'It was only what they couldn't hide that got taken. The old lady left behind a stash of her own when she died, and they won't part with a penny of it. It's all put away in her room. They're going to decide what to do with it alter the funeral.'

These words seemed to make a particularly strong impression on one member of the company, who exclaimed after a few more throws of the dice:

'All I ever do is lose! I'll never break even. I'm off to bed.'

As he walked out, he took He San to one side and muttered:

'A word, old San.'

He San followed him out.

'I can't bear watching a clever fellow like you go skint, when there's no need...'

'It's my luck,' muttered He San. 'What can I do about it?'

'I thought just now you said Rong-guo House was stacked with money. Why not get some of it for yourself?'

'Wait a minute,' rejoined He San. 'It may be stacked with money, but that doesn't mean they'd give *us* a penny of it!'

The man laughed.

'Well, if they won't give it away, why don't we just help our-selves...'

He San began to catch his drift.

'And just how do you propose to do that?' he asked.

'Oh show some guts, man! Don't be so feeble!' was the reply. 'I'd have got my fingers on it long ago.'

'What sort of "guts" have *you* got then?'

The man's voice dropped to a whisper:

'If you want to make a lot of money Out of this, all you have to do is show us the way in - I've got some friends in this line of business, first-class operators. They're just the ones for this job. And it so happens the Jias are all away at this funeral, and there's only a few women left at home. Mind you, a whole garrison of men wouldn't scare *my* friends ... But maybe you're scared?'

'Me!' objected He San hotly. 'I'm not scared! Do you think I'm worried about old Zhou? Why, I only let him be my foster-dad because his missus asked me to. He's nothing. But it all sounds a bit dodgy to me. Could land us in a lot of trouble. The Jias have got connections with every yamen. Supposing we *do* manage to get the stuff Out, it'll be hard to get rid of it.'

‘This time you’re in luck, old friend,’ said the other. ‘Some of my seafaring mates happen to be in the area at this very moment, waiting for a job like this to crop up. Once we’ve got our hands on the money, you and I would be wasting our time in these parts. We’d be far better off going to sea with my mates and spending our fortune there! Good idea, eh? Of course, if you can’t bear the thought of parting from your old foster-mum, we’ll just have to lug her along too. One big happy family, eh!’

‘You’re drunk!’ exclaimed He San. ‘You don’t know what you’re talking about. The whole idea’s a crazy one.’

None the less, he took the man aside into an out-of-the-way alley, and the two of them stood there talking a while longer before going their separate ways. Our story must leave them for the time being.

*

We must return to Rong-guo House and to Bao Yong, the former Zhen family retainer now living with the Jias, who after a dressing-down from Jia Zheng had been demoted to caretaking duties in the Garden. In the general bustle of Grandmother Jia’s funeral, no one thought of assigning him a task. He was unconcerned by this and continued to mind his own business, cooking for himself and leading a somewhat carefree and independent life. If he felt bored, he would take a nap, and on waking would practise with sword and stave in the Garden. On the day of Grandmother Jia’s funeral procession, of which he was quite aware, although he had been given no part to play in it, he was taking a stroll in the Garden when he saw the figure of a nun accompanied by an old matron, making their way to the side gate, where they began knocking. He went up to them:

‘Where would you be going, Reverend Mother?’

The old matron replied:

‘We heard that Lady Jia’s wake is over, and as we couldn’t see Miss Xi-chun in the procession we thought she must have stayed at home. Sister thought she might be lonely and has come to call on her.’

‘None of the family are at home,’ said Bao Yong. ‘I’m in charge of the Garden and I must ask you to return to your quarters. If you want to visit, please wait until they have come back from the procession.

‘And who do you think you are, you ruffian?’ the matron protested indignantly. ‘What business is it of yours *where* we go?’

‘I don’t like your type,’ replied Bao Yong. ‘I say you can’t go, and that’s final.’

‘Why, this is downright mutiny!’ the old matron retorted angrily and noisily. ‘When Lady Jia was alive they never stopped us going anywhere. What kind of an upstart are you, to start throwing your weight around in this insolent manner? I don’t care what you say, I *will* go out this way!’

She seized the door-knocker and struck it several times with all her might.

Adamantina was speechless with rage as she listened to this exchange. She was on the point of going home when the old women on the other side of the gate heard the sound of an argument and opened up to investigate. Deducing that Adamantina must have been offended by Bao Yong, and knowing that she was on intimate terms with the ladies of the house, especially Miss Xi-chun, the women feared that at some later date she might report them for not letting her through, and thereby get them into serious trouble. They hurried after her:

‘We had no idea you were here, Your Reverence. Our apologies for being so slow in Opening the gate. Miss Xi-chun is at home, and would be so pleased to see you. Please come on in. That stupid caretaker is new here. He doesn’t know anything. We’ll report him later to Her Ladyship and she’ll have him beaten and get rid of him.’

At first Adamantina refused to change her mind. But the old women kept on pestering her, begged her not to get them into trouble, were on the point of falling to their knees, until in the end she really had no choice but to

turn back and follow them into the mansion. Bao Yong, Seeing how things stood, understandably made no further attempts at obstruction but went back to his room, scowling and fuming to himself.

Adamantina went straight to Xi-chun's apartment. She offered her condolences and they chatted for a while.

'I still have a few more nights to last out before the others come home,' said Xi-chun. 'Xi-feng is sick, and I'm all on my own. It's so boring and lonely - and scaring! If only I had someone to keep me company! Now that you've come all this way, won't you stay the night? Please! We could play Go together and chat.'

At first Adamantina was reluctant. But she felt sorry for Xi-chun, and then at the mention of the game Go her eyes lit up and she agreed to stay, instructing the matron to return to the Hermitage and send one of the novices with her tea things, her clothes and her bedding. Xi-chun was delighted and for her part instructed Landscape to go and fetch some of the supply of the previous year's rainwater, which had been stored and put aside for making tea. She made a point of saying that Adamantina would not be needing a cup, as she had her own set.

The novice presently arrived with Adamantina's things, Xi-chun made the tea, and the two of them were soon carried away in a spirited conversation that lasted until eight o'clock in the evening, when Landscape laid out the Go-board, and they settled down to play. Xi-chun lost the first two games, but then Adamantina gave her a handicap of four and she managed to win the next by half a point.

Before they knew, it was two o'clock in the morning. Outside, the night was breathlessly still.

'I must meditate at four,' said Adamantina. 'You go in now and rest. My own girl can wait on me.'

Xi-chun was reluctant to go, but complied out of respect for Adamantina's religious practice. She was about to go into her bedroom when suddenly she heard a great cry coming from the women on night-watch in Grandmother Jia's apartment, which was soon taken up by her own serving-women:

'Help! Help! Someone has broken in!'

Xi-chun, Landscape and the other maids were scared out of their wits. Next they heard shouting coming from the men on night-duty in the outer apartments.

'Dear oh dear!' exclaimed Adamantina. 'There must be burglars in the house!'

She hurriedly closed the door of the room and covered her lamp. Peeping through a hole in the window, she could see several men standing in the courtyard outside. Speechless at first with terror, she turned and crept quietly back into the room, gesturing with her hands and finally saying to the others:

'Heaven save us! What great burly fellows there are out there!'

As she spoke, there was a clatter on the roof-top above her head and she heard the night-watchmen bursting into the courtyard with cries of 'Stop thief!'

'Everything has been taken from Lady Jia's apartment! We must find the thief!' called one of them. 'The others have already gone to the east wing. We'll search the west'

One of Xi-chun's old women, hearing familiar voices, called out from inside:

'Some of them have climbed up on our roof!'

'Look!' cried the night-watchmen. 'There they are! Up there!'

A confused hubbub ensued, several tiles came hurtling down from the roof, and none of the watchmen had the courage to climb in pursuit. They were all standing there rather helplessly when a fresh burst of noise came from the direction of the side gate to the Garden, followed by the sound of the gate itself being broken down, and in stormed a great hefty fellow with a wooden club in his hand. They all tried to hide, without any success.

'We must stop them all, every one of them!' bellowed the new arrival. 'Follow me!'

They stood there paralysed with fear, while the club-wielding man continued to harangue them. One of the more perspicacious among them finally identified him as Bao Yong, and gradually the others regained their nerve and began saying shakily:

'One of the thieves managed to escape altogether! But some of them are still up on the roo£'

The instant Bao Yong heard this, he vaulted up onto the roof and went in hot pursuit.

After the main part of their mission was accomplished, the thieves, knowing how unprotected the Jia mansion

was, had been casually snooping around in Xi-chun's courtyard, and had caught a glimpse there of a very attractive young nun, which had put all sorts of mischievous ideas into their heads. They knew that the apartment was unguarded save by a handful of scared old women, and were about to kick the door in and put an abrupt end to Adamantina's meditations when they heard the sound of footsteps coming from outside and escaped onto the roof-top. They soon saw that they outnumbered their pursuers and had decided to fight it out when a man leapt up onto the roof and came after them.

He was on his own and they therefore moved into the attack with short swords, only to find themselves quickly outmatched. With a few powerful and deftly placed strokes of his club, Bao Yong had soon despatched one of them off the roof, while the rest fled over the wall into the Garden, where others of the gang had been stationed to receive the stolen goods. These now drew their swords in defence of the returning party, and seeing there was only one man following them, they closed in on him.

'Petty thieves!' stormed Bao Yong. 'Do you dare to do battle with me?'

'They knocked one of us down!' exclaimed one of the gang. 'He may not even be alive, but we'd better try to get him out!'

Bao Yong moved into the attack, and four or five of the thieves formed a ring around him, brandishing their swords in a confused m6le'e, which finally broke up when some of the night-watchmen plucked up enough courage to come to Bao Yong's aid, and the outnumbered thieves made good their escape. Bao Yong, still in hot pursuit, tripped over some unseen obstacle lying on the roof, and when he clambered to his feet and saw that it was a chest, he deduced that the thieves had failed to take their loot with them, and therefore abandoned his pursuit. They must anyway be well ahead and beyond reach by now, he reflected. He told the servants to fetch lights. On closer inspection he discovered that there were several chests and that they were all empty. He gave orders for them to be removed and himself headed back to the main apartment. His lack of familiarity with the lay-out of the mansion caused him to wander into Xi-feng's apartment, where all the lights were ablaze.

'Have the thieves been here?' he asked.

'We haven't opened the doors,' came Patience's trembling voice from within. 'But we heard cries from the main apartments - you'd better go there.'

Bao Yong had no sense of direction, but he saw the other watchmen in the distance and followed them to the main apartment, where he found doors and windows thrown open and the women on night-duty sobbing.

Presently Jia Yun and Steward Lin arrived, appalled by the news of the burglary. They found Grandmother Jia's door wide open and could see by the lamplight that the lock had been wrenched open and the chests and cupboards inside had all been broken apart. There were curses for the women on night-duty:

'Are you all half-dead? Didn't you even know there were thieves in the house?'

'There's a roster for night-duty,' came the tearful reply, 'and we're on second and third watches. We never stopped on our rounds, we checked front and back. The thieves came during the fourth and fifth watches, just after we finished duty. We heard the shouting, but couldn't see anyone, and when we came to look, the things had already gone. Please, sirs, question the fourth and fifth watch, not us!'

'You deserve to die, the lot of you!' exclaimed Steward Lin. 'I'll talk to you later. First I must inspect the rest of the house.'

The night-watchmen led him to You-shi's apartment, which was securely closed. They heard voices crying from within:

'We nearly died of fright!'

'Has anything been taken from here?' asked Lin. The women finally opened the door.

'No, we've had nothing stolen.'

Next Lin led his men to Xi-chun's, where again they heard voices inside:

'Lord save us! Miss Xi-chun's died of fright! *Please* wake up, miss!' Lin told them to open up, and asked them

what had happened. An old woman appeared in the doorway:

'The thieves were fighting in our courtyard, and Miss Xi-chan was terribly frightened. Luckily Sister Adamantina and Miss Landscape have brought her round. We've had nothing stolen.'

'What do you mean - fighting?' asked Lin.

One of the watchmen replied.

'It was young Bao Yong who saved the day, sir. He climbed onto the roof and chased them away. And I heard one got knocked down.'

'Yes,' put in Bao Yong. 'The body's over by the Garden gate. You'd better hurry over there and have a look.'

Jia Yun and company went to the Garden gate, and sure enough there lying on the ground was the dead body of a man, which on closer inspection was found to resemble very dosely Zhou Rui's adopted son He San. They were all greatly taken aback by this discovery. One man was left to stand guard over the body and two were sent to keep a watch on the front and rear Garden gates, which were both found to have their locks intact. Lin now gave orders to open the main gate and to report the burglary to the police.

The police arrived straight away and began their investigation. The thieves, they concluded, had climbed up onto the roof4Op from a back alley and had made their way across to Grandmother Jia's apartment, where broken tiles were found and more tracks leading straight to the Garden at the rear.

'They were armed!' cried all the servants on night-duty.

The police officer seemed somewhat put out by this:

'There is no evidence of torches or anything that would point to armed robbery. What grounds have you for this accusation?'

'When we chased them, they started throwing tiles at us from the roof and we couldn't get near them. But our Bao Yong managed to climb onto the roof, and he went after them and chased them as far as the Garden, where a whole lot more of them were waiting and put up a fight. But when they found they couldn't beat our Bao Yong, they fled!'

'You see,' exclaimed the officer. 'If they were really armed robbers, they would surely have been able to overpower a single opponent. Anyway, enough of that. Find out exactly what's been taken and provide us with an inventory. Then we can make a proper report on the matter.'

Jia Yun and the other men now went to the main apartment, where they found Xi-chun, and with her Xi-feng, who had dragged herself there despite her illness. Jia Yun enquired after Xi-feng's health, and greeted Xi-chun, and then they all set about the unenviable task of determining what was missing. With Faithful dead, and Amber and the other maids away at the funeral, no one knew where to start. The stolen things were all Lady Jia's personal belongings and had always been kept stored away under lock and key. They had never been properly inventoried.

'The chests and cupboards were full of so many different things,' they said. 'And now they're all empty. The thieves must have had ample time to do their work. What were the women on night-duty doing, for heaven's sake? Since the dead body was He San's, and since he is the adopted son of the Zhous, they were probably all in on it together.'

Xi-feng was livid with rage when she heard this.

'Tie up all the women concerned,' she ordered, 'and hand them over to the police for questioning.'

There was a general outcry, pleas for mercy, women down on their knees begging. To learn what was done with them, and whether or not any of the stolen goods were found, please turn to the next chapter.

CHAPTER 112

Adamantina discharges a karmic debt and receives a blow

from the Hand of Providence
Aunt Zhao concludes a deadly feud and sets out
on the road to the Nether World

The women on night-duty went down on their knees and begged Xi-feng to spare them, but Steward Lin and Jia Yun told them they were wasting their breath:
'The Master left us to mind the house, and now that things have gone wrong, we must all take our share of the blame. You needn't think anyone's going to bale *you* out. If Zhou Rui's adopted son is involved, then everyone - from Her Ladyship downwards - men and women, masters and servants, is under suspicion.'
'Fate has brought this on us,' said Xi-feng, struggling for breath. 'Why waste words? Just take them away. As for the stolen things, you must be sure to tell the police that they all belonged to Her Old Ladyship. Only the masters know the details. When we've sent word to them and they come home, then of course we can make out a list and hand it in to the police. The same statement must be made to the civil authorities.'
'Yes, ma'am.' Jia Yun and Steward Lin went out to execute these instructions.
Xi-chun had said nothing throughout this, but now she began to whimper: 'I've never heard of anything so terrible in all my life! Why did it have to be *us?* When Uncle Zheng and Aunt Wang come home, how am I to face them? They'll say they left the house in our hands, they'll blame us for this disaster. I shall die of shame!'
Xi-feng: 'It's not our doing. The women on night-duty must take the blame.'
Xi-chun: 'It's all very well for you to say that. You were ill anyway. But I've got no excuse! It's exactly what my sister4n4aw planned! She *wanted* me to come to grief! She deliberately talked Aunt Xing into giving me this responsibility. Now I'm quite disgraced!' She broke down, sobbing violently.
Xi-feng: 'You mustn't take it like that. We are all in disgrace. If you adopt such a silly attitude, how am *I* to hold my head up?'
As they were speaking they heard a man's voice shouting in the courtyard:
'I said we should have no truck with such women. They're witches and whores the lot of them! The Zhen family never allowed people like that in the house, and I didn't expect things to be so lax here! Her Old Ladyship's funeral procession was hardly through the front entrance yesterday when that nun from that Hermitage place came pestering to be let in. I told her straight out that she couldn't, but then the old women on the side gate turned round and gave *me* some cheek, and begged her to come in. So some of the time the side gate was closed, some of the time it was open - who could tell what was going on! I lay awake worrying about it till two in the morning, and then I heard shouts coming from the house here. So I called at the gate, but they wouldn't open up, and as the shouting was getting worse I broke the gate down and came in. I saw some men in the west courtyard, chased them and killed one of them. I only found out today that the place I was in was the courtyard of Miss Xi-chun's apartment. So the nun was there with her at the very time the burglary took place. She slipped out this morning before dawn. *She* must have been the one who let the burglars in. She's the traitor in our midst!'
'Who is that insolent fellow?' asked Patience. 'How dare he use such language with Mrs Lian and Miss Xi-chun here inside?'
'He mentioned the Zhen family,' said Xi-feng. 'It must be that vile servant they palmed off on us.'
Xi-chun had heard and understood Bao Yong only too clearly, and felt more wretched than ever as a consequence.
'Wasn't there something about a nun in his babblings?' Xi-feng continued, turning to Xi-chun. 'How did you come to have a nun staying with you? Where did she spring *from?'*
Xi-chun told her that Adamantina had visited her, and that she had stayed on to play Go and keep her company

during the night.
'Oh, Adamantina!' exclaimed Xi-feng. 'How could she possibly have betrayed us! What a ridiculous idea! But still, it would be most unfortunate if this loathsome creature's accusations ever reached Sir Zheng's ears.'
The more Xi-chun thought about the possible consequences for Adamantina the more distressed she became. She rose to leave, but Xi-feng, though anxious herself to return to her own apartment, feared that Xi-chun might do something rash in her present state, and asked her to wait a little.
'Before we go, we must make sure they have sorted what's left of Grandmother's belongings; and we must set a watch.'
Patience: 'But nothing can be sorted before the authorities carry out their inspection. Till then we should leave everything as it is. Has anyone been sent to inform Sir Zheng?'
Xi-feng: 'You'd better send one of the serving-women to find out.'
Presently the reply came back:
'Steward Lin can't go himsel£ Most of the servants are needed to be in attendance for the inspection, and those that can be spared are incapable of explaining things clearly to the Master. So Young Master Yun has already gone.'
Xi-feng nodded, and sat down anxiously with Xi-chun to wait.

*

The gang, who had been brought together by He San and his friend for the express purpose of burgling Rong-guo House, succeeded in laying their hands on a fair amount of gold, silver and valuables and had already passed it out before they were discovered. Even then they were 'able to see at a glance that their pursuers were nothing to be afraid of; and therefore moved on to the west courtyard to investigate possibilities for burglary there. Through the window they spied two very attractive young ladies sitting together in the lamplight, one of whom was dressed in a nun's habit. Their baser instincts were immediately aroused, and they would have burst recklessly in had they not a moment later seen the figure of Bao Yong coming in hot pursuit. They then made a quick getaway, leaving the unfortunate He San behind to the fate we have already described, and reassembled afterwards in secret with their 'fence'. The next day they learned that He San had been stopped and killed, and that the police and civil authorities had been alerted. It was no longer safe for them in town, and after some discussion they decided to make their way back without delay to their headquarters on the coast and rejoin their pirate friends. A general warrant for their arrest would soon be issued, after which it would be impossible for them to pass through the inspection posts.
There was however one especially brazen character among them. 'It's all very well saying we ought to leave town,' he said. 'But I've still got my eye on that little nun. Beautiful little piece of work! I wonder which convent she's from, the luscious thing!'
'Aiyo!' exclaimed one of the others. 'I've just remembered. She must be that nun who lives right on the premises, in Prospect Garden, in that place they call **Green** Bower Hermitage. Wasn't there a story going round a year or two ago about her and their Master Bao? She fell head over heels in love with him and in the end they had to call in the doctor. She must be the one!'
'In that case,' said the first, 'let's lie low tonight and give the skipper time to buy the gear we need to pass as travelling merchants. Tomorrow at dawn bell you can start leaving town at intervals and wait for me at Seven Mile Bank.'
It was settled. They shared out the spoils and went their separate ways.

*

When Jia Zheng and the rest of the cortege had conveyed the coffins of Lady Jia and Faithiul to the temple and had formally deposited them there until such time as they could be placed in a permanent grave, the various relatives and friends who had accompanied them took their leave. Jia Zheng installed himself in one of the outer wings of the temple as his 'mourning quarters', while the ladies stayed in the inner room where the coffins had been placed. There was continuous lamentation throughout the night.

The next morning they began the funeral offerings once more, and were in the act of setting Out the sacrificial dishes when Jia Yun burst in. First he kowtowed before Grandmother Jia's coffin, then he hurried over to Jia Zheng, dropped one knee to the ground and proceeded to give a breathless account of the previous night's burglary and the loss of Grandmother Jia's belongings. He described how Bao Yong had given chase and had killed one of the robbers, and concluded by saying that the facts had already been laid before the police and civil authorities. Jia Zheng listened to all this aghast, while the ladies, who overheard with horror from the inner room, were also too shocked to speak and could only sob loudly. Eventually Jia Zheng composed himself sufficiently to ask:

'What sort of an inventory has been made of the stolen items?'

Jia Yun: 'None of the servants knew what was there, so the inventory has not been made yet.'

Jia Zheng: 'A good thing too. After the confiscation, if we were to include things of value in the inventory, we'd be guilty of a further infringement of the law. Tell Lian to come here at once.'

Jia Lian had gone with Bao-yu and some of the other young male Jias to make offerings in a different part of the temple, and hurried back on receiving Jia Zheng's summons. The news put him in a state of extreme agitation, and in front of Jia Zheng he began cursing and swearing at Jia Yun:

'Miserable wretch! I entrust you with an important responsibility, and expect you to organize the night-watch properly, and look what you have gone and done! Are you half-dead or something? I'm amazed you have the nerve to come here at all!'

He spat in his face. Jia Yun stood there with his hands hanging at his sides, not daring to breathe a word.

Jia Zheng (to Jia Lian): 'Swearing at him won't achieve anything.'

Jia Lian (falling to his knees): 'What are we to do?'

Jia Zheng: 'There's nothing we *can* do, except wait and hope that the authorities apprehend the thieves. The trouble is we never opened any of Grandmother's boxes. When you came to me for money, I thought it improper to start taking her silver when she'd only been dead a few days. I decided to wait until after the funeral and to settle all our accounts at once and invest any surplus in trust-estates here and in the South. So we don't even know exactly what she had left. Now the police want an inventory, and we can hardly include anything of value on it; but at the same time we'll never get away with "sundry quantities of gold and silver and various items of clothing and jewellery". Come on, what are you still kneeling down there for, you useless creature!'

Jia Lian did not dare say a word, but rose to his feet and began walking out of the room.

Jia Zheng: 'Where are you off to now?'

Jia Lian retraced his steps.

'I thought I should go home at once and try to sort this out properly.'

There was a 'hm' from Jia Zheng (signifying, 'I should think so too'), and Jia Lian hung his head abjectly.

Jia Zheng: 'Report first to your mother. When you go home, take one or two of Grandmother's maids with you. Tell them to think carefully, and produce something in the way of an inventory...'

Jia Lian knew that Faithful had been in charge of all Grandmother Jia's personal effects, and that now she was dead it would be useless to ask Pearl or the other maids to remember. But he hadn't the nerve to contradict Jia Zheng, and responding docilely to his instructions, he went to the inner room, where he had to endure the reproaches of Ladies Xing and Wang, and was then ordered to hurry home and bid the women on night-duty prepare themselves for their mistresses' wrath. Assuring his mother and aunt with a somewhat ill grace that he

would do as they commanded, Jia Lian went out and ordered one of his men to hire a carriage for Amber and Grandmother Jia's other maids, while he himself mounted a mule and hastened home with a few of his pages. Jia Yun had no stomach for further confrontations with Jia Zheng, and he sneaked out in a sort of sideways slither, mounted horse and caught up with Jia Lian. Their ride into town passed uneventfully.

Jia Lian was greeted at Rong-guo House by Steward Lin, who led him into Grandmother Jia's apartment, where they found Xi-feng and Xi-chun waiting. Seething as he was with bitterness towards them both, Jia Lian restrained himself and turned to ask Lin:

'Have the authorities had a look yet?'

Lin (kneeling guiltily): 'Both the police and the civil authorities have made an inspection, sir. They discovered the burglars' tracks, and examined the corpse.'

Jia Lian (with considerable surprise): 'What corpse?'

Steward Lin told him how Bao Yong had killed one of the burglars, and that the dead man showed a strong resemblance to Zhou Rui's adopted son.

Jia Lian: 'Send for Jia Yun!'

When Jia Yun came in, he too fell to his knees before Jia Lian.

Jia Lian: 'Why didn't you tell Uncle Zheng about this, that one of the burglars was Zhou Rui's adopted son, and that he had been killed by Bao Yong?'

Jia Yun: 'The men on night-duty only said that it *looked* like him. I was afraid they might turn out to be wrong, so I didn't mention it.'

Jia Lian: 'Idiot! If you'd told me, I could have brought Zhou Rui with me to identify the corpse. That would have settled any doubt.'

Lin: 'The authorities have taken the corpse away and exhibited it in the market-place for identification.'

Jia Lian: 'That's pretty damned foolish of them! As if anyone would come forward for a man that's been killed escaping from a burglary!'

Lin: 'There's no need for identification anyway, sir. I recognized the man myself.'

Jia Lian pondered for a minute.

'Of course! Wasn't it Zhou Rui's adopted son that Mr Zhen wanted to have flogged a year or so ago?'

Lin: 'That's right, sir. He was caught fighting with Bao Er. You must have seen him at the time.'

Jia Lian was made angrier still by this revelation, and wanted to beat the man on night-duty, but Steward Lin pleaded with him to abate his wrath.

'They had their orders, sir, and I'm sure they did their duty. But it is a strict family regulation that men are not allowed beyond the inner gate. Even we are not allowed in unless expressly sent for. Master Yun and I did our rounds regularly in the outer apartments; the inner gate was firmly closed, and none of the outer gates was left open. The burglars broke in from a back alley.'

Jia Lian: 'Where are the women who were supposed to be on night-duty in the inner apartments?'

Lin informed him that on Xi-feng's instructions the women had all been detained and bound, and were waiting to be interrogated.

Jia Lian: 'And Bao Yong?'

Lin: 'He has gone back to the Garden.'

Jia Lian: 'Send for him.'

The pages went to fetch Bao Yong, and when he arrived Jia Lian praised him for his conduct:

'It's a good job you were here! Otherwise I dare say everything in the house would have been taken!'

Bao Yong said nothing. Xi-chun was terrified that he was going to open his mouth and start abusing Adamantina. Xi-feng maintained an apprehensive silence.

It was reported meanwhile that Amber and the other maids had arrived from the temple, and they entered and amid much weeping exchanged greetings with the rest of the household. On Jia Lian's orders the servants searched Grandmother Jia's apartment to see what if anything the burglars had left behind, and found nothing but clothes, a few lengths of fabric and some caskets of copper cash. Jia Lian was now more distraught than ever. The men working on the awning and the pall-bearers had not been paid, nor had the extra kitchen expenses for the funeral reception been met. Where was he to find the money now? He brooded morosely, while Amber and the other maids went into Grandmother Jia's inner rooms and broke into a renewed fit of sobbing as they surveyed the havoc. The boxes and cupboards were all flung Open, and how could they possibly remember what had been in them? However, they eventually managed to concoct a list of sorts, which they handed to a servant to deliver to the authorities. Jia Lian issued instructions for that night's watch, and Xi-feng and Xi-chun went back to their rooms. Jia Lian thought it best not to spend the night at home, and did not even find time to reproach Xi-feng for her part in the affair. As soon as he could get away he mounted horse and galloped back to the temple. Xi-feng was still anxious that Xi-chun might be contemplating suicide, and sent Felicity over to comfort her.

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At ten o'clock that night the gates were firmly barred - a somewhat superfluous precaution by now - and everyone lay in bed in a state of nervous wakefulness. But our narrative leaves Rong-guo House and returns to the nun-besotted burglar. He knew that the Hermitage occupied an isolated location in the Garden, and that the nun's only companions there were a few old matrons and novices, who would present no obstacle. He made his plans accordingly. At midnight, when all was quiet, equipped with a knife and a supply of potent narcotic incense, he scaled the Garden wall, and from his vantage point there he could see in the distance lamps burning in the Hermitage. He crept stealthily across and hid himself in an out-of-the-way corner.

By two o'clock, there was only a single night-light still burning. Adamantina was sitting cross-legged on her mat. She took a short break from her meditations, and after several gusty sighs reflected aloud to herself:

'When I came to the capital from my old home on Mount Xuan-mu, I had hoped to make a name for myself. But then when the Jias invited me to stay here, I could hardly decline their invitation. And now I can't even do something as simple and innocent as paying a visit to Xi-chun without being heaped with abuse by some coarse creature. And later in the night I had such a fright! How nervous I've been all day, ever since my return. I simply can't settle down properly and meditate.'

She usually meditated alone, and even today had not asked the others to Stay up with her. But suddenly at four o'clock she began to tremble with cold and was about to call out to one of her women when she heard a sound through the window. She thought immediately of what had happened the previous evening and gave a terrified cry for help! But it brought no answer. From where she sat she could detect a strange smell seeping right into her head, and she felt her limbs becoming gradually numb and incapable of movement, her mouth incapable of speech. Panic began to grip her. Helplessly she watched as a stranger entered her room, a man, with a knife glistening in his hand. Though she was paralysed, her mind was still clear, and thinking that she was about to be murdered she steeled herself mentally to her fate and found herself surprisingly free of fear. Then to her amazement the man slipped the knife back into the scabbard slung over his shoulder, came towards her and put both his arms softly round her. He fondled her briefly, then hoisted her up onto his back. By now Adamantina was too groggy to understand what was happening to her. The drugs had sent her into a profound stupor, and she surrendered her virginal body into the stranger's hands, to do with as he pleased.

With Adamantina on his back, the man made his way to the Garden wall, which he scaled with a rope-ladder, climbing down to where some of his accomplices were waiting with the getaway cart. They bundled her in and set off. The impressive-looking official titles inscribed on the carriage lanterns enabled them to pass through the district barricades, and by the time they reached the city gate it was opening time and the gatekeeper did not even bother to ask any questions, thinking they were on official business. Once out of the city, they pressed on to Seven Mile Bank, where they joined the rest of the gang and agreed to make their ways separately to the South coast.

It is not known what eventually became of Adamantina: whether she submitted willingly to her captor's desires, or whether she resisted and died in so doing. In the absence of conclusive evidence as to her ultimate fate, it would be futile for us to speculate on that subject. Instead, our narrative returns to the Hermitage. One of the old nuns who had her quarters to the rear of Adamantina's meditation chamber slept that night until four in the morning, when she was awakened by the sound of voices from the front room. Adamantina must be having a restless spell in her meditations, she concluded. But then afterwards she heard heavy (and unmistakably male) footsteps and the sound of doors and windows opening and closing. She would have risen to investigate, but her limbs had become quite weak and she could not so much as open her mouth to speak. No further sound came from Adamantina's room, and the old nun lay there till dawn in a stupor, with her eyes wide open. It was only then that her head began to clear; she threw on some clothes and told the old matrons to heat the water for Adamantina's morning tea. Then she went to the front room, but to her alarm found no trace of Adamantina, and door and windows open wide. She began to have suspicions about the sounds she had heard in the night.

'Where could she have gone so early in the morning?' she asked aloud.

Walking out into the Garden, she saw a rope4adder hanging from the wall, and lying on the ground beneath it a scabbard and sash.

'Oh my goodness! It must have been a burglar last night! He must have put us all to sleep!'

She called the others to rise and make a search of the Hermitage. The main gate was still firmly closed.

'Oh dear, the fumes from the stove were terrible last night!' grumbled the old matrons and young novices alike when they were summoned. 'None of us felt like getting up this morning. What do you want us for at this ungodly hour?'

'Sister Adamantina has disappeared!' exclaimed the nun.

'She's probably in Our Lady Guan-yin's chapel meditating.'

'You're all still dreaming! Come and have a look.'

The women finally roused themselves in a flurry of alarm, opened the main gate of the Hermitage and searched throughout the Garden. Then it occurred to them that Adamantina might have gone to visit Xi-chun, and they went in a body to knock at the side gate, only to receive another round of abuse from Bao Yong.

'We don't know where Sister Adamantina went last night,' they said. 'We're looking for her. Open up, old fellow, and let us into the house. We just want to find out if she's been visiting there or not.'

'She was the one who let the burglars in!' cried Bao Yong. 'Now they've got what they came for, and she's gone off with them to enjoy it!'

'Holy name!' exclaimed one of the women. 'You'll have your tongue cut out in hell for such wicked talk!'

Bao Yong (vehemently): 'Rubbish! Any more trouble from you and I'll have to use force.'

Women (smiling obsequiously now and pleading): 'Please sir, we beseech you, open the gate. Just let us have a look. If she's not there, we'll never bother you again.'

Bao Yong: 'Very well. If you don't believe me, go in and look for yourselves. But if you don't find her, I shall want an explanation from you on your way back.'

He opened the gate and the women went into Xi-chun's apartment.

Xi-chun was in very low spirits that morning, and was still brooding about what had happened the previous day: 'Adamantina went home so early yesterday. I wonder if she heard what that servant Bao Yong said. If he has

offended her again, she'll never come and visit me; and then I shall have lost my only real friend in the world. With Mother and Father both dead and my own sister-in-law hating me the way she does, I find it so hard to face other people. Before there was always Granny Jia, I knew I could count on her for affection. Now that she's gone too, I'm utterly alone. What will become of me?'

She thought of the other girls and their various fates:

'Ying-chun driven to her death; Xiang-yun married to a consumptive; Tan-chun living at the other end of the world ... Each one of them had her destiny, and each was powerless to change its course. Adamantina is the only free one among us, free as a wandering cloud or a wild crane. If I could only be like her, how happy I would be! But how *can* I hope to follow her example? I belong to a *wealthy family!* And now I've let even my family down, and I'm in complete disgrace. Neither Aunt Wang nor Aunt Xing understands how I feel. There's no telling how life will turn out for me!'

She was more resolved than ever to take the final, irrevocable step, to cut her hair and by so doing signal once and for all her entry into

the religious life. Landscape and the other maids heard the snip of the scissors and hurried over, but they were too late. She had already removed a good half of her hair.

'Before one disaster is over, here's another!' cried Landscape in alarm. 'What are we to do now?'

This was the state of disarray that prevailed in Xi-chun's apartment when Adamantina's old women arrived on their search. Landscape enquired what their mission was and was shocked to hear of Adamantina's disappearance.

'She left us early yesterday morning and hasn't been back since,' she informed them. Xi-chun overheard from inside and asked in alarm:

'Where has Adamantina gone?'

One of the women told the tale, how they had heard sounds in the night, had been put to sleep by the incense, had found Adamantina missing in the morning and discovered the rope-ladder and scabbard by the Garden wall. Xi-chun was both distressed and puzzled. She recalled Bao Yong's accusations of the previous day, but dismissed them at once from her mind, reflecting that most probably the burglars had spotted Adamantina and come back during the night to carry her off. But she knew Adamantina; surely a person of such chastity and pride would have died rather than submit to such indignity?

'Didn't you hear anything?' she asked of the women.

'We heard,' they replied. 'But we couldn't do anything. We could only lie there with our eyes wide open, unable to say a word. The burglars must have put us to sleep by burning some sort of incense. And Sister Adamantina must have been overcome with the fumes too. That's why she couldn't speak either. Besides, there were probably a lot of them, armed to the hilt, so she would have been too scared to make a noise or cry out.'

Bao Yong could be heard yelling from the gate:

'Get those stupid old hags out of here and close the gate at once!' Landscape, who was afraid of causing fresh trouble, told the women to leave immediately and gave orders for the gate to be closed.

Xi-chun was now more miserable than ever. Landscape and her other maids repeatedly urged her to take a more reasonable view, and persuaded her to put up the remaining portion of her hair.

'We mustn't spread the word about Adamantina,' they all agreed. 'Even if it is true, we must behave as if we know nothing until Sir Zheng and Lady Wang come home.'

From this day, Xi-chun's determination to renounce the world was immovable. But of this no more at present.

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When Jia Lian returned to the Temple of the Iron Threshold, he reported t6 Jia Zheng that he had

interrogated the men on night-duty and had seen to it that an inventory was prepared and delivered to the authorities.

'How did you manage with the inventory?' asked Jia Zheng. Jia Lian showed him a copy of the list Amber had made up from memory, adding:

'All Grandmother's presents from Her Grace are clearly indicated. Any other unusual or conspicuous items have been left off the list. When my period of mourning is over, I shall instigate a search for those items and am confident we shall find them.'

Jia Zheng thought this course of action wise, and nodded his silent approval.

Jia Lian went in to see Ladies Xing and Wang, and begged them to urge Jia Zheng to return home as soon as possible. The longer they stayed away the greater the chaos would be when they got back.

'I quite agree,' said Lady Xing. 'So long as we stay here, we'll only be in this dreadful suspense anyway.'

'I would not dare suggest an early departure myself;' said Jia Lian. 'But if it came from you, Mother, I am sure Uncle Zheng would agree.'

Lady Xing discussed the matter with Lady Wang, and they both agreed that Lian's suggestion was a good one.

As it turned out, by the next morning Jia Zheng was himself anxious to return and sent Bao-yu into the ladies with this message:

'I propose that we return today and resume our mourning here in two or three days' time. I have given the necessary instructions to those of my servants who are staying behind; would the ladies be so good as to do likewise?'

Lady Xing instructed Parrot and some of the other maids to stay as mourners, and left Zhou Rui's wife and a few of the older stewardesses in overall charge. Everyone else was to return home. There was an immediate bustle of activity as carriages were prepared and horses saddled, and Jia Zheng led the family in a final lamentation, bidding ceremonial farewell to Grandmother Jia's mortal remains.

They had all risen from their prostrations and were about to leave, when they noticed that Aunt Zhao was still down on her knees. Aunt Zhou thought she must still be weeping and came over to help her up. But something more than grief had incapacitated her; she was foaming at the mouth, her eyes were fixed in a glassy stare, her tongue protruded from her face. The sight gave everyone a nasty turn, and Jia Huan came up to his mother crying frantically, which seemed to bring her round momentarily.

'I won't go home!' she began babbling. 'I'm going back to the South with Lady Jia!'

'But why should Lady Jia need you to go with her?' they asked. 'I've been with her all my life. Sir She wanted to separate us and tried all manner of tricks to lay his hands on me. I thought old Mother Ma could help me get my own back but that was all money wasted: it didn't work, nobody died. Now if I go home, I'm afraid someone may try to take revenge!'

At first they thought she was possessed by the spirit of Faithful, but her subsequent reference to Mother Ma pointed to something quite different. The ladies said nothing, but Suncloud and some of the other maids interceded with the spirit on Aunt Zhao's behalf:

'Sister Faithful, your death was of your own choosing; what does it have to do with Mrs Zhao? Please set her free!'

With Lady Xing present they didn't dare say any more.

'I'm not Faithful!' protested Aunt Zhao. 'I've been sent for by King Yama of the Nether World. He wants to question me about Mother Ma and the black magic...'

She dropped her voice to a whisper, and continued:

'Oh Mrs Lian, put in a good word for me with Lord Yama! For all the bad that I've done, there must be some

good! Dear Mrs Lian! Dearest Mrs Lian! I never meant to harm you! I was such a fool! I should never have listened to that old slut!'

While this extraordinary scene was taking place, Jia Zheng sent in a servant to fetch Jia Huan. One of the serving-women went out to inform the Master that Aunt Zhao was possessed by some evil spirit, and that Jia Huan was looking after her.

'What nonsense!' exclaimed Jia Zheng brusquely. 'We're leaving now anyway.'

So the men set off; while Aunt Zhao continued to rave deliriously and no one could bring her to her senses. Lady Xing was afraid she might say something even more indiscreet.

'Leave some women here to keep an eye on her,' she ordered. 'We really must be going. When we reach the city we'll send ~ doctor.'

Lady Wang had always disliked Aunt Zhao and was only too glad to abandon her. Bao-chai, on the other hand, was less ill-disposed towards her; she knew that Aunt Zhao had tried to harm Bao-yu, but could not help feeling sorry for her all the same and secretly asked Aunt Zhou to stay behind with her. Aunt Zhou was a good soul, and agreed to do so. Li Wan volunteered to stay as well, but was informed curtly by Lady Wang that her presence would be unnecessary.

They were now ready to leave.

'What about me?' asked Jia Huan in some alarm. 'Do I have to stay too?'

'You great booby!' retorted Lady Wang contemptuously (and not a little hypocritically). 'Would you forsake your own mother when she is at death's door?'

Jia Huan dared not utter another word.

'Dear brother,' said Bao-yu, 'you really ought to stay. As soon as we get~to town, I'll send someone out to you.'

They climbed into their carriages and returned home, leaving Aunt Zhao with Aunt Zhou, Jia Huan and a few serving-women at the temple.

When they reached home, Jia Zheng, the ladies and the rest of the family went to Grandmother Jia's apartment and tearfully surveyed the scene. Steward Lin came in at the head of the domestic staff to pay their respects.

'Get Out!' shouted Jia Zheng as they fell to their knees. 'I shall deal with you tomorrow!'

Xi-feng had already fainted several times that day, and was too weak to come out and welcome them home. The only person to receive them was Xi-chun, looking extremely ashamed of herself. Lady Xing ignored her entirely, Lady Wang was her reasonable self; while Li Wan and Bao-chai took her by the hand and spoke a few comforting words. You-shi predictably had a barbed comment to make:

'What a deal of trouble we have put you to these last few days, my dear!'

Xi-chun could say nothing in reply, but only blushed a deep **crimson** from ear to ear. Bao-chai took You-shi aside and gave her a meaningful look. The ladies went to their rooms.

Jia Zheng examined the extent of the damage, heaving many a silent sigh. He went into his study and, sitting on his mourning mat, sent for Jia Lian, Jia Rong and Jia Yun and gave the three of them a short homily. Bao-yu wanted to wait on him in the study, but Jia Zheng said it would not be necessary. Jia Lian went to his mother's room. That night passed uneventfully.

First thing next morning Steward Lin came into the study and knelt before Jia Zheng, who asked him for a full account of the calamity. Lin mentioned that Zhou Rui was involved:

'Mr Lian's servant Bao Er has been arrested, and some of the items on the inventory of stolen property have been found on his person. He is being interrogated, and they hope to trace the burglars through him.'

This piece of information threw Jia Zheng into a rage:

'That our servants should have the base ingratitude to betray us to thieves, that they steal from their own masters! It is sheer treason!'

He sent a man at once to the temple to bind Zhou Rui and deliver him to the authorities for questioning. Lin remained kneeling and did not dare rise to his feet.

‘What are you still down there for?’

‘I deserve to die, sir! I beg your forgiveness!’

Lai Da and some of the other stewards now came in t6 pay their respects and to present the various bills for funeral expenses.

‘Give these to Mr Lian to deal with. He can report back to me afterwards.’

Jia Zheng bellowed at Lin to get up and leave the study. Jia Lian now knelt on one knee and whispered a suggestion in Jia Zheng’s ear.

‘Out of the question!’ snapped Jia Zheng, glowering at Lian. ‘Just because the money for Mother’s funeral has been taken by thieves, does that mean we must stoop to fining our own servants?’

Jia Lian blushed and said nothing further. He stood up but dared not move.

‘How is it with your wife?’ asked Jia Zheng.

Jia Lian knelt again.

‘I’m afraid she is near the end.’

Jia Zheng sighed.

‘I never dreamt that our family would crumble as quickly as this! And now, to add to our misfortunes, Huan’s mother has been taken ill at the temple, and we still don’t know what’s the matter with her. Do you know anything about this?’

J ia Lian did not dare breathe a word.

‘Tell one of the servants,’ said Jia Zheng, ‘to take a doctor Out there and have a look at her, will you?’

‘Yes, Uncle.’

Jia Lian went out at once, and executed these instructions. To learn if Aunt Zhao survived or not, please turn to the next chapter.

CHAPTER 113

Xi-feng repents of her former misdeeds, and entrusts
her child to a village dame
Nightingale softens a long-standing animosity,
and warms to her besotted master

After the departure of most of the family from the temple, Aunt Zhao grew more delirious than ever, and those who had remained with her listened aghast. Two serving-women attempted to support her where she knelt on the ground, one minute raving incoherently, the next sobbing her heart out in anguish. Then she grovelled and began begging for mercy:

‘Oh Great Lord **Red** Beard! You’re killing me! I’ll never be so wicked again!’

She wrung her hands and howled in agony. Her eyes bulged out of their sockets, blood gushed from her mouth, her hair was wildly dishevelled. She was a terrifying sight, and no one now dared go near her.

By evening her voice began to grow hoarse and she sounded more and more like a croaking harpy. None of the women could bear to be in her presence, and they deputed some of the more courageous menfolk to come in and keep watch on her. One minute she seemed to be gone, then she came round again, and so it went on all night. By the next morning she was incapable of speech, her face was horribly contorted and she began rending her clothes and baring her bosom, as if someone else was stripping her naked. She was now totally inarticulate, and the torment she was undergoing was terrible to behold.

She seemed to have reached a final crisis, when the doctor arrived. He would not take her pulse, but gave orders at once for her last things to be made ready and himself prepared to leave without further ado. The servant who had brought him entreated him to stay and take her pulse, so that he could at least return with a satisfactory report to his master, and in the end the doctor relented. He felt her pulse once, and pronounced that there was no sign of life. Hearing this, Jia Huan burst out wailing, and immediately everyone's attention was turned to him and no one spared another thought for Aunt Zhao, lying dead on the kang, her feet bare, her hair in disarray. Only Aunt Zhou seemed affected.

'Such is the end of a concubine!' she thought morbidly to herself. 'And *she* even bore the Master a son. Who knows what sort of a death *mine* will be!'

The servant meanwhile hurried back to inform Jia Zheng, who sent a man to attend to Aunt Zhao's funeral arrangements and to stay on with Jia Huan at the temple for three days, after which they were both to return. The accepted version of Aunt Zhao's death was that she had been called before the Infernal Tribunal and tortured to death for her wilful attempt to injure the lives of others. A speedy end was also predicted for Xi-feng, since Aunt Zhao had named her as her own accuser in the Nether World.

When this last piece of gossip reached the ears of Patience, she was most distressed. Her mistress did indeed seem beyond hope of recovery, and to make matters worse, Jia Lian had recently made it plain that he had no scrap of affection left for his wife. He was now more preoccupied than ever, and appeared completely unconcerned by Xi-feng's illness. Patience did her best to be cheerful with Xi-feng; but Ladies Xing and Wang, although they had been back from the temple for several days, had neither of them paid her a personal visit, and had only sent a maid to enquire after her health. Their coldness intensified Xi-feng's misery, as did the fact that Jia Lian on his return had not so much as a kind word for her.

All Xi-feng wanted now was to die a quick death, and this made her a prey to all manner of evil spirits. On one occasion she saw the figure of You Er-jie slowly approaching her bed from the back of the room.

'It is so long since we last met, sister!' said the apparition. 'I've thought a great deal about you, but it's been impossible for me to come and see you. Now I've managed to do so at last, and I find you reduced to this extremity. Lian is too much of a fool to appreciate what you've done for him, and instead he complains how mean you are, and says that you're ruining his career and making him feel thoroughly ashamed. I can't bear to see you treated so!'

'I myself have come to regret my own small-mindedness,' mumbled Xi-feng in reply. 'Dear sister! It is so kind of you to visit me like this, and to put past grievances behind you!'

Patience was standing at her side and heard her speaking.

'What was that, ma'am?' she asked.

Xi-feng suddenly awoke and recalled at once that You Er-jie was dead. This must be her spirit seeking the life of her tormentor in vengeance. Now that Patience had woken her, she felt scared but at the same time reluctant to confess her fear. She tried somewhat shakily to compose herself

'I'm just feeling a little unsettled,' she said to Patience. 'I think I must have been talking in my sleep. Will you come and give me a rub?'

Patience climbed up onto the kang and had just started pummelling her when a junior maid came in and announced that Grannie Liu had come, and was being brought in by the serving-women to pay her respects to Mrs Lian.

'Where is she?' asked Patience, getting down anxiously from the kang.

'She didn't presume to come straight in,' replied the maid. 'She is waiting for Mrs Lian's instructions.'

Patience nodded. She thought that Xi-feng would feel too weak to receive visitors, and said to the maid:

'Mrs Lian needs to have a rest. Tell Grannie Liu to wait a while. Did you ask her what she has come about?'

'They have already asked her,' replied the maid, 'and she said she has come on no particular business. She has only just learned of Her Old Ladyship's death. She would have come before if she had known sooner.'

Xi-feng had overheard them, and called Patience over:
'If someone has had the kindness to call, we must not appear rude or unappreciative. Go and ask Grannie Liu to come in. I should like to talk to her.'
Patience reluctantly complied, and went out herself to fetch Grannie Liu. As soon as she left the room, Xi-feng began to drift off to sleep again, and as her eyes closed she saw another apparition -this time a man and a woman walking towards the kang. It seemed they were about to climb up onto it, and she called out in alarm for
Patience:
'There's a man coming towards me!'
Her cries brought Felicity and **Crimson** rushing to her bedside.
'What do you want, ma'am?'

Xi-feng opened her eyes. The figures had vanished. She knew they must be spectres come to haunt her, but again could not bring herself to say so in front of the maids.

'Where's that wretched Patience got to?' she asked. 'Didn't you send her to fetch Grannie Liu?' Xi-feng lay still for a while in silence to recover her spirits. Presently Patience returned with Grannie Liu, who had brought a little girl with her and was asking:

'And where's our Mrs Lan?'

Patience led her up to the kang.

'Good day, ma'am,' said Grannie Liu.

Xi-feng opened her eyes, and as she looked at the old dame, she felt strangely moved.

'How are you, Grannie?' she asked. 'Why has it been so long since you last came to see us? How big your granddaughter has grown!'

Grannie Liu was most distressed to see the state Xi-feng was in -as thin as a stick, and evidently confused in her mind.

'Why, Mrs Lian!' she exclaimed. 'To think that in the few months since last I was here you could have fallen so ill! I'm a foolish old baggage and deserve to die for not having visited you sooner!'

She told little Qing-er to come up and pay her respects, but the girl only giggled. Xi-feng thought what a sweet child she was, and told **Crimson** to take charge of her.

'We country folk never fall ill,' pronounced Grannie Liu. 'If happen we should, then we pray to the gods and make our vows. We never take medicines and the like. I'm wondering now if you mightn't have fallen foul of some evil spirit, to have taken ill like this, ma'am?'

Patience was aware that Grannie Liu's rustic superstitions were ill-timed, and gave her a meaningful tug from the rear. The old dame interpreted this correctly and fell silent. But her words had in fact found an echo in Xi-feng's own thoughts.

'Grannie, dear,' she said, speaking with a great effort, 'you're a lady with years of experience, and what you say is true. Did you know that Aunt Zhao had died too? You met her when you were here, didn't you?'

'Holy Name!' exclaimed the old lady in the greatest Surprise. 'Fancy *her* dying, just like that! She was such a sturdy body. And she'd a young son if I recall - what will become of him?'

'He'll be all right,' Patience consoled her. 'He still has the Master and Lady Wang to look after him.'
'That's as may be,' replied Grannie Liu gravely. 'But can you be so sure, miss? I mean, it's his own mother - however bad she may have been - as has died. Nobody can ever take a mother's place.'
This coincided with another of Xi-feng's keenest anxieties, and she broke down and began sobbing. They all rallied round to comfort her.
When Qiao-jie heard her mother in such distress, she came to the kang, held her hand and burst into tears herself.
'Have you said hello to Grannie Liu?' asked Xi-feng tearfully.

‘No, Mama.’

‘She gave you your name, and is like a foster-mother to you. Give her a curtsey now.’

Qiao-jie went across to Grannie Liu and was about to curtsey when Grannie Liu seized her and said:

‘Holy Precious Name! Don’t you go weighing me down with such honours - it’ll carry me to my grave! Miss Qiao-jie, it’s over a year since I last was here; do you still remember me?’

‘Of course I do! That time when I saw you in the Garden I was still a very little girl. But I remember two years ago I asked you to bring me some big crickets. I can see you haven’t brought me any. You must have forgotten.’

‘Oh missie!’ exclaimed Grannie Liu. ‘What a silly old soul I am! If you want crickets we’ve enough and to spare at home. But you never come and visit us. If you came, you could bring home a cartload of crickets if you so wanted.’

‘In that case,’ put in Xi-feng, ‘why not take her home with you for a visit?’

‘How could I possibly, ma’am?’ said Grannie Liu laughing. ‘Such a fine gentle young lady that’s grown up wrapped in silks and satins and used to dainty things to eat - why, what would I give her to play with at home? What would I feed her with? Would you have me die of shame?’

She cackled and went on:

‘Mind you, I *could* act as a matchmaker for the young lady. Ours may only be a village, but we’ve wealthy folk there all the same, with land that spreads for thousands of acres around and hundreds of cattle and a fair bit of money too. Nothing to compare with the treasure you’ve got here, of course. In fact come to think of it you’d probably not so much as glance at such folk really, ma’am. But to us country people they’re dwellers in heaven!’

‘By all means go ahead and propose the match,’ said Xi-feng. ‘I should be only too pleased to give Qiao-jie in marriage to such a family.’

‘Come, ma’am, you must be joking. Why, I dare say you’d be fussy about some great official family that lived in a big mansion, let alone simple country people. And even if you were willing, I hardly think Their Ladyships would be!’

Qiao-jie found the conversation embarrassing and had gone off somewhere to talk to Qing-er. The two girls were soon chatting away together, and gradually struck up a friendship.

Patience was worried that Grannie Liu’s endless ramblings would wear Xi-feng out, and presently she took her aside and said:

‘Speaking of Her Ladyship, you still haven’t been to call on her. I’ll find someone to take you over there. It would be a great pity not to see her now that you’re here.’

Grannie Liu was about to set off, but Xi-feng called her back:

‘What’s the great hurry? Sit down, I want to talk to you. Tell me how things have been at home.’

Grannie Liu thanked Xi-feng profusely for her kind concern. ‘If it weren’t for your help, ma’am,’ she began, pointing at Qing-er, ‘her ma and pa would have starved to death by now. Life is still hard (how could it be otherwise for country folk?), but they’ve been able to scrape together an acre or two and put down a well and grow some vegetables and fruits and gourds. With the money they get every year for the produce, they manage to keep body and soul together. And what with the clothes and material you’ve been sending us so regularly these past two years, ma’am, we’re thought of as among the more comfortably off in our village. Holy Name! I remember the day when Qing-er’s father came into town and heard the news that your family had been raided by the Embroidered Jackets, ma’am. When he came home and told me, I nearly died of the shock! Then later someone else told me it wasn’t)’our side of the family after all - I was so relieved! Afterwards I heard about Sir Zheng being promoted and was so pleased I wanted to come straight here to offer my congratulations. But we had so much to do on the land that I couldn’t get away. And then yesterday I heard that Her Old Ladyship had passed away! I was bringing in the beans, and I was that shocked I couldn’t go on, I

just had to sit down on the ground and cry my heart out. I said to my son-in-law: “I don’t care what you say, it may be true or it may just be a rumour, but either way I’m going into town to find out for myself!” They’re not a bad sort, my daughter and her man, and they wet their eyes too when they heard the news. So this morning they saw me off and I left before first light and came here as quick as I could. There was no one to ask on the way and I couldn’t get any news, so I came straight here to the back gate and when I saw the door-gods all pasted over with white I got the shock of my life. I tried finding Mrs Zhou, but there was no sign of her. Then I ran into a young lady who told me Mrs Zhou was in trouble and had been given the sack. I waited for ages before I saw someone I knew and was able to come in. I’d no idea you were so sick too, ma’am!’

Grannie Liu was in tears. The distressing effect she was having on Xi-feng made Patience anxious, and she drew her aside before she could say any more:

‘Now, Grannie, after all this talking your mouth must be awfully dry. How about a nice cup of tea?’

She took her off into one of the maids’ rooms, while Qing-er continued playing in Qiao-jie’s room.

‘I really don’t want any tea,’ protested Grannie Liu. ‘Please, miss, can someone take me over to Her Ladyship’s now? I’d like to pay my respects and mourn for Her Old Ladyship.’

‘There’s no hurry,’ said Patience. ‘It will be too late for you to leave this evening anyway. I was afraid you would upset Mrs Lian with all your talking. That’s why I hurried you out. I hope you won’t take offence.’

‘Holy Name! How very thoughtful of you, miss! But how is Mrs Lian ever going to get better?’

‘Does it look serious to you?’ asked Patience.

‘Maybe I shouldn’t say this,’ replied Grannie Liu, ‘but to me it looks very nasty.’

They heard Xi-feng calling and Patience hurried to her bedside. Xi~feng said nothing further, however, and Patience was just asking Felicity what the trouble was when they were interrupted by the arrival of Jia Lian. He glanced at the kang where Xi-feng lay, then without a word stomped into the inner room, uttered a series of exasperated grunts and sat down. Autumn was the only one to follow him in. She poured his tea and waited on him attentively, whispering something in his ear. Jia Lian summoned Patience and asked her:

‘Isn’t Mrs Lian taking medicine?’

‘What if she isn’t?’

‘Oh, how should I know? Bring me the key to the chest.’

The blackness of his mood was more evident than ever to Patience. She restrained herself from saying anything in reply, but went out and whispered in Xi-feng’s ear. Xi-feng was silent. Patience fetched a casket, placed it by Jia Lan’s side and walked away.

‘Where are you off to in such a damned hurry?’ snapped Jia Lian. ‘Aren’t you going to take the key out for me, now that you’ve dumped the thing there?’

Patience tried not to react. She opened the casket, took out the key and opened the chest with it. Then she asked:

‘What do you want from it?’

‘What have we got in there?’

Patience finally broke down. Half angrily, half tearfully she begged Jia Lan:

‘Please, won’t you tell us what the matter is? It’s not fair to keep us in this dreadful suspense...

‘What is there to say? You’re the ones who caused this trouble in the first place. Now we owe four or five thousand taels for Grandmother’s funeral, and Uncle Zheng has told me to mortgage some family property to raise the money. Do you imagine we’ve anything left to mortgage? It’s going to look pretty bad if we can’t meet our debts. I never asked to do this. I shall just have to pawn the things Grandmother gave me. Well, what’s the matter with you? Don’t you agree?’

Patience did not say a word, but started taking everything out of the chest. **Crimson** came up to her:

‘Come quickly! Mrs Lian has been taken bad!’

Patience hurried in, forgetting Jia Lian entirely, and found Xi-feng waving her arms wildly in the air. She tried

to hold her down, calling **Out** to her tearfully. Even Jia Lian now came in to have a look. He stamped his foot and cried:

'This will be the death of me!'

Tears started to his eyes. Felicity came m:

'You're wanted outside, sir.

Jia Lian checked himself and went out.

Xi-feng was weakening with every minute, and Felicity and the other maids began wailing and sobbing. Qiao-jie heard and came running in, followed by Grandmother Liu, who hurried over to the kang and began muttering prayers to the Buddha and a lot of other mumbo-jumbo, which appeared to rally Xi-feng's spirits a little. Presently Lady Wang arrived, having heard the news from a maid; by this time Xi-feng was more peaceful; and Lady Wang saw no undue cause for concern. She greeted Grannie Liu and asked her how long she had been at Rong-guo House. Grannie Liu returned the greeting and immediately began talking at some length about Xfeng's illness. After a while Suncloud appeared with a message that her mistress was wanted by Sir Zheng, whereupon Lady Wang gave Patience a few instructions and left.

After her bad spell, Xi-feng's mind seemed to grow clearer. She saw Grannie Liu in the room once more, and began to feel a growing faith in the efficacy of the old dame's prayers. She told Felicity and the others to leave them alone and, calling Grannie Liu over to the side of her bed, confided to her that she felt very troubled at heart and was constantly seeing spirits. Grannie Liu replied that in her home village there was a certain miraculous Bodhisattva, and a certain temple where prayers were always answered.

'I beseech you to pray for me,' said Xi-feng. 'If you need money for offerings, I can provide it for you.'

She slipped a golden bracelet off her wrist and gave it to Grannie Liu. 'There's no need of that,' said Grannie Liu. 'If we country-folk make a vow, we give a few hundred cash when we get better - no need for anything as grand as this. If I go and pray for you, that will be your vow, ma'am, and when you're better you can go yourself and give what you want.'

Xi-feng knew that Grannie Liu was sincere, and did not try to press the bracelet on her.

'My life is in your hands, Grannie!' she said. 'My little girl also is pursued by countless ailments and afflictions. I entrust her to you as well.'

Grannie Liu readily agreed.

'I really ought to be going if I'm to catch the gates,' she said. 'There's still just time. In a day or two, when you're better, you can come and offer thanks.'

Xi-feng's soul was beleaguered by the spirits of those she had harmed during her lifetime, and she was eager for the old lady to go and pray for her:

'Do your best for me. If I can only get some peaceful sleep, I shall be so grateful to you. You can leave your granddaughter here.'

'But she's only a country lass, and has no manners,' protested Grannie Lu. 'I'm afraid she'll only make trouble here. I'd better take her with me.

'Don't you worry. She is one of the family, it will be quite all right. We may be hard up, but I think we can feed one extra mouth.'

Grannie Liu could tell that Xi-feng meant what she said, and for her part she was only too pleased to let Qing-er stay with the Jias a few days and save a little at home. The only problem was that Qing-er herself might not be willing. She decided to call her over and offer her the choice, and soon discovered that the two girls had become firm friends, that Qiao-jie was most reluctant to let Qing-er go, and that Qing-er herself was eager to stay. The old lady gave her grandchild a few parting words of advice, said goodbye to Patience and hurried out, anxious to reach the city gates before they closed. And there our narrative must leave her.

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Green Bower Hermitage was built on Jia family land, and when Prospect Garden was created for the Visitation, the site of the Hermitage was included within the Garden's precincts. But as a religious establishment it had always been self-supporting, and had never been dependent on Jia family charity. The nuns in residence had reported Adamantina's calamity to the authorities and were waiting for them to apprehend the criminals. Meanwhile, since their community belonged to Adamantina, they resolved to stay where they were, and informed the Jias to this effect.

Although the household staff all knew of Adamantina's disappearance, they had not wanted to trouble Jia Zheng with such a matter at a time when he was in mourning and had a great deal else on his mind. In fact Xi-chun was the only one of the family to know about it at first, and was in a state of constant anxiety and suspense on Adamantina's behal£ Then the story, or rather two versions of it, reached Bao-yu's ears; according to one she had been kidnapped, according to the other she had succumbed to the temptations of the flesh and eloped of her own free will with a lover. 'She must have been kidnapped,' Bao-yu thought to himself in great perplexity. 'A person like her would never have acquiesced in such a thing.

would rather have died!' As time went by there was still no news of her whereabouts, however, and every day Bao-yu sighed sadly to himself, reluctant to believe that Adamantina of all people, the self-styled 'Dweller Beyond the Threshold' of this world, could have come to so worldly an end. His thoughts ran on to the happier days they had shared in the Garden and the more troubled times that had followed: 'Since Ying left home, some of my cousins have died, others have been married. Somehow I always thought that if there was one absolutely pure and incorruptible person among us, it was Adamantina. But now this sudden storm of calamity has blown up out of nowhere, and a death stranger than Dai-yu's has taken her away!' As he pursued this train of thought to its logical conclusion, a line from *Zhuang-zi* came into his mind: 'This life, this insubstantial tissue of vanity, floats like a cloud on the wind!' With this he burst into tears, and Aroma, who thought it was another of his fits, endeavoured to comfort him with tender words of affection.

At first Bao-chai could not imagine what had upset him, and she admonished him in her usual fashion. But when he continued depressed despite her efforts and remained in an apparent state of trance for days on end, she became greatly perplexed and eventually, after making persistent enquiries, discovered the truth. She was herself greatly distressed to learn of Adamantina's disappearance, but her concern for Bao-yu tempered her grief, and she rallied him again briskly:

'Look at young Lan now: I've heard that he's been hard at work ever since he returned from the funeral! He hasn't been going to school, but day and night he pores over his books at home on his own. And he's only Lady Jia's great-grandson! You're her grandson; she had such high hopes for you. And Father worries day and night about you. And yet you indulge yourself and ruin your health over some trifle, some silly piece of sentimentality. We depend on you. What will happen to all of us, if you carry on like this?'

There was little Bao-yu could say in answer to this. After a long silence he finally came out with:

'But it's not a trifle! It's a tragedy! It's the decline of our entire family that I'm lamenting!'

'Listen to you!' retorted Bao-chai. 'The one thing Father and Mother want is that you should do well and be a credit to the family. If you persist in this folly, how can the family fortunes ever hope to improve?'

Her words received a most unsympathetic reception from Bao-yu, who proceeded to lean over the table and doze off. Bao-chai ignored him, and went to bed, telling Musk and the others to wait on him.

Bao-yu soon awoke, and noticed how few people were left in the room with him.

'I've never had a proper talk with Nightingale since she was transferred to our apartment,' he thought to himself. 'She probably thinks I've been very cold. I feel very bad about it. I can't treat her like Musk or Ripple - they're easy to deal with. Nightingale's different. I remember how she kept me company all those times I was ill -I still have the little mirror she left. She must have felt something for me then, but somehow whenever we meet now, she's very distant and cold. Surely it can't be because of Chai; she and Dai-yu were the closest of

friends, and she always treats Nightingale kindly too. When I'm not at home, in fact, she and Nightingale often talk and laugh together. But the moment I walk in, Nightingale leaves the room. It must be because my wedding took place at the very time when Dai-yu was dying ... Oh Nightingale! Nightingale! Surely a clever girl like you can see the anguish that I suffer!'

His thoughts ran on:

'This is my chance, while they are all asleep or busy sewing, to find Nightingale and have a talk with her. I'll see what she has to say, and if there's still some way in which I have caused offence, I can try to make it up with her.'

He stole quietly Out of the room and went in search of Nightingale.

She was living in a maid's room in the west wing. Bao-yu crept up to one of the windows, and seeing that there was still a light burning inside, used the tip of his tongue to moisten a spy-hole in the window-paper and peep through. He saw her sitting idly on her own by the lamp.

'Nightingale!' he whispered. 'Are you still awake?'

Nightingale was startled and sat there stunned for a few moments before asking:

'Who's there?'

'It's me!' replied Bao-yu.

Nightingale thought she recognized Bao-yu's voice.

'Is it you, Mr Bao?'

'Yes!' whispered Bao-yu, to which Nightingale replied:

'What are you doing here?'

'I've something private to talk to you about. Let me in and we can sit and have a chat.'

After a pause, Nightingale replied:

'What do you want to talk about? It's getting late. Please go back to your room now. You can tell me about it in the morning.'

Bao-yu was very disheartened. If he persisted in his efforts, he was afraid Nightingale would bar the door to him; on the other hand, if he went back, how would the emotions that seethed within him find an outlet, emotions that his short exchange with Nightingale had only served to intensify? He made one last attempt to talk her round:

'I haven't a great deal to say. Just one question to ask.'

'Well, if it's only one question, go ahead.'

Bao-yu, however, now suddenly found himself quite bereft of the power of speech, and a long silence ensued. Nightingale, on her side of the window, began to find his silence worrying. She knew his tendency to have fits, and feared that her brusque manner might have caused one of his relapses. She stood up and after listening carefully for a moment, asked:

'Have you gone, or are you still standing there gawping? Why don't you speak your mind instead of spending your time driving people to distraction? You've already driven one person to death; do you want to drive another? It's all so senseless!'

She peeped back at Bao-yu through the spy-hole. There he was, standing, listening to her with a trance-like expression on his face. She felt it advisable to say no more, and walked back and began trimming her lamp. Suddenly she heard Bao-yu sigh:

'Oh Nightingale! You've never been as cold as this before! Why have you not had a single good word for me recently? I know I'm a sorry specimen of humanity, too impure to merit any real respect. But I still wish you'd tell me what it is that I've done wrong. Then I could endure being shunned by you for the rest of my life. At least I could die knowing my faults.'

Nightingale sniffed scornfully.

'Is that all you had to say? Isn't there anything new? I know all *that* by heart. I heard enough of *that* when

Miss Lin was alive. But if *I've* done anything wrong, you should take your complaints to Her Ladyship. She's the one who told me to wait on you. We're only tmaids anyway, what do *we* count for?'

She started sobbing and snivelling. Bao-yu knew that she was suffering too, and he stamped his foot in frustration.

'How can you talk like that? After being here all these months, surely you must know what's on my mind? And if none of the others will speak for me, won't you let me tell you myself? Do you want me to go on bottling it up inside for ever, and choke to death?'

He too began sobbing his heart out, when a voice was heard behind him, Saying:

'Who, pray, should speak for you? Why drag others into it? You've offended her, so you jolly well make it up. It's up to her to decide whether she'll forgive you. Why put the blame on nobodies like us?'

Both Bao-yu on the outside of the window and Nightingale on the inside were greatly startled by this intruder - who turned out to be Musk. Bao-yu felt most embarrassed, as Musk continued:

'What *is* going on here? One grovelling for forgiveness, the other refusing to take any notice. Come on now, you hurry up and apologize; and as for you, Nightingale, you're being altogether too cruel! It's dreadfully cold out here, and he's been pleading with you for ages and not had so much as a breath of a response!'

She turned to Bao-yu:

'It's late, and Mrs Bao's been wondering where you are. To think that you've been here all along, standing out on your own under the eaves! What *are* you up to?'

'Honestly!' protested Nightingale from inside. 'This is ridiculous! I simply asked him to go away. I told him that whatever he had to talk about could wait till the morning. What's the sense in all this?'

Bao-yu still wanted to speak to Nightingale, but now that they were no longer alone, he felt too embarrassed to continue. He resigned himself to returning with Musk, saying as he walked

'So be it! I shall never in this lifetime be able to prove my feelings! Heaven alone will know the truth!'

Tears started suddenly to his eyes and rolled in torrents down cheeks.

'Mr Bao!' said Musk. 'Take my advice and put the whole thing out of your mind. You're wasting your tears.'

Bao-yu followed her silently to his room. Bao-chai was lying asleep, or rather, as he judged, feigning sleep, but Aroma greeted him with a rebuke:

'Couldn't it have waited till tomorrow? Did you have to go storming out there and work yourself up into another...'

Whatever she had been about to Say, she thought better of it, and after a short pause went on to ask:

'Are you sure you're not feeling poorly?'

Bao-yu said nothing, but shook his head. Aroma put him to bed and it goes without saying that he spent a sleepless night.

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Nightingale was most distressed by Bao-yu's visit, and she too lay awake the whole of that night, weeping and reflecting deeply to herself:

'It seems plain that the family conspired together and tricked him into the wedding at a time when he was too ill to understand. Then afterwards, when he knew what he had done**,** he suffered one of his attacks and that's why he hasn't been able to stop weeping and moping ever since. He's obviously not the heartless, wicked person I took him for. Why, today his devotion was so touching, I felt really sorry for him. What a dreadful pity it is that our Miss Lin never had the fortune to be his bride! Such unions are clearly determined by fate. Until fate reveals itself, men continue to indulge in blind passion and fond imaginings; then, when the die is cast and the truth is known, the fools may remain impervious, hut the ones who care deeply, the men of true sentiment, can only weep bitterly at the futility of their romantic attachments, at the tragedy of their earthly plight. *She* is dead and knows nothing; but he still lives, and there is no end to his suffering and torment. Better

by far the destiny of plant or stone, bereft of knowledge and consciousness, but blessed at least with purity and peace of mind!'

These philosophical reflections cooled the feverish turmoil in Nightingale's mind, and she was tidying up and preparing to go to bed, when she heard a great rumpus break out in the direction of Xi-feng's apartment to the east. But to discover what this portended, you must turn to the next chapter.

CHAPTER 114

Wang Xi-feng ends her life's illusion
and returns to Jinling
Zhen Ying-jia receives the Emperor's favour
and is summoned to the Palace

It was the middle of the night when Bao-yu and Bao-chai were awoken and informed that Xi-feng was dying. They rose from bed at once, a maid brought a lighted candle, and they were on their way out of the courtyard, when another message came from Lady Wang:

'Mrs Lian's condition is critical, but she is still alive, and Mr and Mrs Bao should wait a while. There is something odd about Mrs Lian's state; from midnight until two o'clock this morning she wouldn't stop talking, and we couldn't make head or tail of what she was saying. One minute she was demanding a boat, the next a sedan-chair; then she was "off to Jinling to be entered on the Register"

No one could understand a word, and she just kept on crying and wailing. There was nothing for it but for Mr Lian to go and get a paper boat and sedan made for her. He hasn't come back with them yet, and Mrs Lian is waiting for him, gasping for breath. Her Ladyship wants you both to wait and to come after Mrs Lian has finally passed away.'

'How extraordinary!' exclaimed Bao-yu. 'What does she want in Jinling?'

'Didn't you see some registers in a dream once?' whispered Aroma. 'Perhaps that's where Mrs Lian is going.'

Bao-yu nodded:

'Yes! If only I hadn't forgotten what was written in them. Our lives are clearly preordained by destiny. I wonder where destiny has taken Cousin Lin? What you said just now, Aroma, about the registers, has set me thinking. If I ever have a dream like that again, I must be more observant. I may see things and be able to predict the future.'

'Hark at you!' retorted Aroma. 'It's impossible to have a sensible conversation with you. You insist on taking a chance remark of mine

in deadly earnest. Even supposing you *could* see into the future, what good would it do you anyway?'

'It will probably never come to pass,' replied Bao-yu. 'But if I ever did know the future, then at least it would mean an end to all the worries that plague me on your account.'

Bao-chai came up to them:

'What are you two talking about?'

Bao-yu was afraid of being subjected to one of her inquisitions, and merely replied:

'We were discussing Cousin Feng.'

'There she is dying,' exclaimed Bao-chai, 'and you're *discussing* her! You accused me last year of being

unduly gloomy and bringing her bad luck; but wasn't my interpretation of that oracle the right one after all?'
Bao-yu thought for a moment, then clapped his hands:
'Of course! Of course you were right! You're obviously the prophet in the family! Well, let me consult you myself. What's in store for me?'
'Off you go on one of your hobbyhorses again!' Bao-chai chided him with a smile. 'Mine was simply an off-the-cuff explanation for the wording of the oracle. There's really no need to take it seriously. You're as bad as Xiu-yan. When you lost your jade, she asked Adamantina to consult the planchette, and the answer was totally unintelligible to everyone; but that didn't stop Xiu-yan from talking to me in private about Adamantina's amazing powers of clairvoyance, saying how enlightened and advanced she was in her Zen practice. And yet look at this calamity that's befallen Adamantina now - why couldn't she have predicted *that?* What sort of clairvoyance is that supposed to be? Just because I said something once about Cousin Feng, that doesn't mean I ever claimed to see into her future, or into my own for that matter. Claims of that sort are fantastic and don't deserve to be taken seriously.'
'All right,' said Bao-yu, 'let's drop the subject. Tell me about Xiu-yan instead. We've been so busy that her wedding seems to have passed us by altogether. That was an important event for your family, and yet it was celebrated with so little ceremony. Didn't you even invite any relatives and friends?'
'You've missed the point again,' replied Bao-chai. 'My own family's dosest relatives are the Jias and the Wangs. There's no one respectable left in the Wang family now, and the Jias weren't invited because my mother knew we'd be too busy with Grandmother's funeral. Lian lent a hand, and one or two other relations came - but you wouldn't know about that, as you weren't there. If you think about it, things were much the same for Xiu-yan as they were for me. She was formally engaged to Cousin Ke, and Mama wanted a stylish wedding. But in the first place, Pan was still in gaol, so Cousin Ke wanted to keep it simple; then there was Grandmother's funeral; and Xiu-yan was having such a hard time at Aunt Xing's, especially after the confiscation, when Aunt Xing became Stingier than ever. Poor Xiu-yan, she could hardly bear it. I talked to Mama, and in the end she decided to go ahead and make do with a simple ceremony. Xiu-yan seems a lot happier now and she is so good to Mama, far better than her real daughter-in4aw ever was. She's a wonderful wife to Ke, and gets on very well with Caltrop. If Ke has to be away for some reason, the two of them still manage very happily together. They are a bit hard up, but Mama is a great deal more relaxed than she used to be. She still gets upset about Pan, and he's always writing to her from gaol and asking for more money. But luckily Cousin Ke has been able to collect some of the debts that were owing, and has sent Pan the money from that. Some of our town properties have had t6 be mortgaged too. We still have one house left, and that's where Mama is planning to move now.'
'What's the need?' protested Bao-yu. 'It's so much more convenient for you to have them living close by. If they move so far away, it will be a whole day's expedition to visit them.'
'Even when families are as closely related as ours,' said Bao-chai, 'it's really much better in the long run to be independent. Mama can't go on for ever living on charity.'
Bao-yu was about to expand on the reasons for their not moving when a final message came from Lady Wang, to say that Xi-feng passed away, and all the family had now arrived in her apartmen Would Bao-yu and Bao-chai please join them there? Bao-yu his foot and seemed about to burst into tears. Ba~chai too deeply moved, but controlled herself for fear of upsetting Bao-yu any further.
'We should keep our tears for later,' she counselled.
They both made their way directly to Xi-feng's room, where they found a weeping throng gathered. Bao-chai went forward to bedside, where Xi-feng's body was already laid out, and gave a great cry of grief. Bao-yu held Jia Lian's hand and sobbed loudly, which set Jia Lian off again. Patience, seeing that no one else was capable of offering an? comfort, stepped forward, and tried to mask her own grief and urge moderation. Sounds of inconsolable weeping continued to fill the room none the less.

Jia Lian was in a helpless dither. He sent for Lai Da, and told him to make whatever preparations were necessary for the funeral. He himself reported Xi-feng's death to Jia Zheng and then went to see what other arrangements he could make. But there were simply no funds; it was an impossible task. Fond memories of Xi-feng brought tears constantly to his eyes and his distress was made still more acute by the pitiful sight of Qiao-jie, crying her heart out for her mother. The weeping continued all that night. At dawn Jia Lian sent a messenger for Xi-feng's elder brother Wang Ren.

The death of his older uncle Wang Zi-teng had left Wang Ren free to carry on very much as he pleased. Zi-sheng, the surviving younger uncle, was too ineffective a character to control him, and Wang Ren had already by his behaviour succeeded in causing considerable discord in the family. Now, learning of the death of his younger sister, he hurried over (with a slightly ill grace) to perform his duty as a bereaved brother and mourn for her. On his arrival he observed immediately how makeshift the funeral arrangements were and voiced his indignation in no uncertain terms:

'Years my sister toiled for you, did a fine job of it too. The least you owe her is a proper funeral. You should be ashamed of yourselves, making such a poor show of it!'

Jia Lian had never been on good terms with his brother-in-law, and, when he heard him blustering on like this, turned a deaf ear. Wang Ren next called Qiao-jie aside.

'My girl,' he said to her, 'while your mother was alive, she had one shortcoming: she was too anxious to please Lady Jia, and as a result she neglected her own family. But you're old enough now to make decisions yourself, my dear! Look at me, have I ever tried to profit from you? Now that your mother is dead, you must look to me and do as I tell you. Your great-uncle and I are your mother's family. I know your father, he'll go out of his way to bow and scrape to anyone, rather than take any notice of us. When that fancy woman of his, that Auntie You, died, I wasn't in town, but I heard that a lot of money was spent on her. And now he's Scrimping on your own mother's funeral. Don't you think you ought to have a word with him about it, and make him see sense?'

'Father would like nothing more than to have a nice funeral,' said Qiao-jie. 'But things have changed. We haven't enough money, so of course we have to be a bit careful.'

'What about your own things?' pursued Wang Ren relendessly. 'Surely you've something left yourself?'

'It all went in the raid last year,' said Qiao-jie. 'I've got nothing left at all.'

'Are you trying me on too?' expostulated Wang Ren. 'I know that Lady Jia gave away all sorts of things. You ought to produce your share now.'

Qiao-jie could not bring herself to admit that her father had already taken her share and sold it, and so pretended not to understand what he was referring to.

'I know!' exclaimed Wang. 'You're keeping it for your trousseau!' Qiao-jie refused to say another word. Wang Ren had already offended her with his remarks and she began to sob until she was almost choking with emotion.

'If you have anything else to say, sir,' protested Patience heatedly, 'please wait until Mr Lian comes back. Miss Qiao-jie is much too young to understand.'

'As for you, you've just been itching for my sister to die, haven't you!' sneered Wang Ren. 'The lot of you! So you could step into her shoes ... I'm not asking for much; just a decent funeral. Surely you don't want to disgrace your own family?'

He sat himself down in a surly fashion.

Qiao-jie was feeling very miserable. 'I know Father *does* care,' she was thinking to herself. 'And besides, when Mother was alive, Uncle Ren sneaked off with all sorts of stuff of hers himself, so he's got no right to complain.'

In her eyes Wang Ren was rather a despicable sort of person. He for his part secretly reckoned to himself that Xi-feng must have kept her own private hoard, and that despite the raid there was bound to be silver

somewhere in her apartment - and a fair amount of it too.
'They probably think I've come to Sponge, and the girl is trying to protect them. She won't be any use to me, the little wretch!'
He began to conceive an intense dislike for his niece.
Jia Lian was far too busy trying to rustle up money for the funeral to take in all these complications. He had delegated the 'outer' formalities to Lai Da, but he still needed a lot of money for the 'inner' reception and could not see how he was going to find it. Patience was aware of his predicament.
'You mustn't overdo things, sir,' she urged him. 'You'll only make yourself ill.'
'Ill!' exclaimed Jia Lian, somewhat histrionically. 'That's the least of my worries! We can't even find the money to get by from day to day, let alone pay for the funeral. And to make matters worse, now I've got this idiot round my neck!'
'There's really no need to work yourself into such a state, sir,' said Patience. 'If you've no money, I've a few things that were not taken in the raid. Use them if you like.'
'What a wonderful stroke of luck!' thought Jia Lian to himself. He smiled at Patience:
'That *would* be a real help. It would save me from having to race around trying to raise the money. I'll pay you back as soon as I can.'
'Whatever I have was given me by Mrs Lian in the first place,' said Patience. 'So there's really no need to pay me back. I just want the funeral to be done properly, that's all.'
Jia Lian accepted Patience's offer with sincere gratitude, and pawned her belongings for the funeral expenses. From then on he made a point of discussing everything with her. Autumn was most put out, and took every opportunity to mutter complaints:
'Now that Mrs Lian is gone, Patience thinks she can take over. The Master gave me to Mr Lian; how can Patience think to climb above me?'
Patience noticed Autumn's disgruntled attitude, but paid no attention. Jia Lian, for his part, found Autumn's resentment (which he observed soon enough) most objectionable, and whenever anything happened to annoy him he vented his bad humour on her. Lady Xing criticized him for this, and he felt obliged to restrain himself. But of this no more.

*

In due course, after Xi-feng's encoffined corpse had been laid out for ten days, it was escorted to the temple. Jia Zheng was still in mourning for Grandmother Jia and was confined to his study during the period of Xi-feng's funeral. His entourage of literary gentlemer had gradually deserted him. Only Cheng Ri-xing still called regularly; On one occasion Jia Zheng was speaking to him on the genera subject of the family's decline:
'See how one by one we are dying off! My elder brother and young Zhen are both in exile. Our finances deteriorate daily. And who knows what has become of our country estates in the Eastern provinces. Altogether, a disastrous state of affairs!'
'I have been here many years, sir,' said Cheng, 'and I have seen for myself how busy your staff are, enriching themselves at your expense. Every year sees money draining from your pockets into theirs. It is ruining you. Then there is the money needed for the families of 5ji She and Mr Zhen, and the sizeable debts incurred besides, and the loss sustained as a result of the recent burglary, which I hardly think will be recovered. If you wish to put your house in order, sir, the only remedy I envisage is for you to assemble your staff, and to charge your most trustworthy steward with a comprehensive investigation of their accounts. In that way you can judge in which department retrenchment is possible. Deficits should be made good by the individual steward responsible. That way you will at leas know where you stand.
'Then there's the Garden. It is too large for anyone to buy. But I is a shame that a place with such potential for profit should have been so neglected. During the years that you have been away, sir, the staff there have been

manufacturing all manner of frightening tales which have had the effect of deterring everyone from entering the place. All your troubles are, in short, the doing of the servants. You should make a thorough investigation, and dismiss any unsatisfactory elements among them. It is the only remedy that makes sense.'

'My dear Cheng,' replied Jia Zheng, nodding his head gravel) 'you do not seem to realize: I cannot even trust my own nephew, let alone the servants! And if I myself were to try to carry out a investigation such as you suggest, I could never hope to get to the root of the problem. Not that I could engage in such a thing anyway while still in mourning. Even if I did, I have never paid much attention to household details in the past, so I really have no

what we are supposed to have and what we don't have. I would no know where to look.'

'You are altogether too charitable and virtuous a man, sir,' rejoined Cheng. 'In any other family of comparable position, even if things had reached this critical state, the masters would count on being able to stave off disaster for another five or ten years by asking their stewards for money. I understand that one of your men has even been appointed to a district magistracy ...'

'No!' cut in Jia Zheng firmly. 'When a man stoops to borrowing from his own servants, it is the beginning of the end. We shall simply have to draw in our belts a little. If we still own the property that is down on our books, well and good. But personally I am inclined to believe that there may be very little reality behind some of those entries.'

'Precisely, sir,' replied Cheng. 'That was my very reason for suggesting an inspection of the accounts.'

'Why, have you heard something?' asked Jia Zheng.

'Word has reached me of some of the iniquities perpetrated by those servants of yours,' answered Cheng. 'But I hardly dare mention them in your presence, sir.'

Jia Zheng realized from Cheng's tone of voice that he was speaking the truth.

'Alas!' he sighed. 'Since my grandfather's day, we have always had a tradition in my family of being considerate and generous to our servants. We have never treated them harshly or given them cause for complaint. What is the present generation coming to! And if I were suddenly to start acting the strict master now, I hardly think I would be treated seriously.'

As they were talking, one of the janitors came in and announced that Excellency Zhen of the Nanking family had come to call.

'What brings him to the capital?' asked Jia Zheng.

'I understand, sir, 'replied the servant, 'that he has been reinstated by Imperial favour.'

'Show him in at once,' said Jia Zheng.

The servant went out to usher in the visitor. This Excellency Zhen was the father of Zhen Bao-yu; his full name was Zhen Ying-jia, his courtesy name You-zhong (Friend of the Loyal). The Zhens were, it will be remembered, like the Jias, an illustrious old family from Nanking, and the two families had a long-standing family connection and had always seen a good deal of each other. Zhen Ying-jia had lost his post a year or two previously for some misdemeanour, and the family property had subsequently been confiscated. Now His Majesty the Emperor had shown him a special favour as the descendant of a loyal and deserving subject, had restored him to his hereditary position and had summoned him to the capital for an audience. Knowing that Lady Jia had recently passed away, Zhen had prepared an offering and had chosen an auspicious day in the almanac on which to convey the offering to the temple where her remains were lying. Before so doing he called at Rong-guo House to pay his respects.

Mourning etiquette prevented Jia Zheng from going out to greet his guest, but he welcomed him at the threshold of his outer study. When Zhen Ying-jia saw him, sorrow and joy mingled in his breast. Both gentlemen refrained from any elaborate display of ceremony, and instead clasped each other simply by the hand and exchanged greetings. They sat down at either side of a table, Jia Zheng offered his guest some tea and they continued to talk for some little while.

‘When were you received by His Majesty?’ asked Jia Zheng.
‘The day before yesterday,’ replied Zhen Ying-jia.
‘His Majesty in his great kindness must surely have favoured you with some words of instruction.’
‘Yes indeed. His Majesty, whose kindness exceeds the heavens, has favoured me with a decree.’
‘May I enquire as to its import?’
‘In view of the recent outbreak of piracy on the South coast, and the unsettled conditions prevailing among the people there, His Majesty has despatched the Duke of An-guo on a mission of pacification against the rebels. Because of my familiarity with the region, he has ordered me to take part in the campaign. I shall have to leave almost immediately. When I learned yesterday that Lady Jia had passed away, I prepared a humble offering of petal-incense to burn before her coffin, as a small expression of my devotion.’
Jia Zheng kowtowed his thanks and replied:
‘I am sure this enterprise will be an opportunity for you to set His Majesty’s mind at rest, and to bring peace to the nation. I have no doubt too that it will bring you great personal glory! I only regret that I shall not be able to witness it with my own eyes, but will have to content myself with hearing the news of your victories from afar. The present commander of the Zhenhai littoral is a relation of mine, and I hope that when you meet him you will receive him favourably.’
‘How are you related to the commander?’ asked Zhen Ying-jia.
‘During my period of office as Grain Intendant in Kiangsi,’ replied Jia Zheng, ‘I betrothed my daughter to his son, and they have been married three years now. A protracted coastal disturbance and the continued concentration of pirates in the region have prevented news of them from reaching us for quite some time. I am most concerned for my daughter’s well-being, and earnestly beseech you to visit her, when your duties are completed and a convenient Opportunity presents itself. In the meanwhile I shall write her a short letter, and if you would be so kind as to have it delivered for me by one of your men, I should be eternally grateful.’
‘Children are a source of concern to us all,’ rejoined Zhen. ‘I myself was on the point of asking *you* a similar favour. When I received my instructions from His Majesty to proceed to the capital, I decided to bring my family with me; my son is of a tender age and we have so few servants at home now. I have had to hurry on ahead, while my family are following at a more leisurely pace and should arrive here any day. I have been given my marching orders already and cannot delay here any longer. When my family arrive they are sure to call on you, and I have instructed my son to kowtow to you in the hope of benefiting from your counsel. Should a suitable offer of marriage make itself known to you, I should be most grateful if you would make representations on our behalf.’
‘But of course,’ Jia Zheng assured him. After a little more chat, Zhen Ying-jia rose to take his leave, saying:
‘I shall hope to see you tomorrow outside the city.’
Jia Zheng knew that Zhen must have many other engagements and would not be prevailed upon to stay. He saw him to the study door, where Jia Lian and Bao-yu were waiting to escort him out (in the absence of a summons from Jia Zheng they had not ventured into the study). The two younger men stepped forward to salute him. Zhen Ying-jia seemed quite stunned by the sight of Bao-yu.
‘Take away the white mourning clothes,’ he thought to himself. ‘and this young man is the very image of our own Bao-yu!’
‘It is such a long time since we last met,’ he said politely, ‘that I have quite forgotten your names.’
Jia Zheng indicated Jia Lian:
‘My elder brother She’s son, Lian.’

Then pointing to Bao-yu:
‘My own second son, Bao-yu.’
Zhen clapped his hands:

‘How extraordinary! I heard tell at home that you had a well4oved son born with a jade, and that his name was Bao-yu. I was at first greatly surprised that our sons should share the same name, but later I reflected that such coincidences must be quite frequent. Now I have seen him in the flesh, I am amazed all over again! He is the living likeness of my own son! Not only his features, his whole manner and bearing are the same!’

On being told Bao-yu’s age, he commented:

‘My son is a year younger.’

Jia Zheng went on to say that he had already gathered a little information about Zhen Bao-yu from Bao Yong, the former Zhen retainer whom Zhen Ying-jia had himself recommended to them. Zhen Ying-jia seemed too engrossed in Bao-yu to enquire after his old servant**,** but kept exclaiming:

‘Most extraordinary! Most extraordinary!’

He took Bao-yu by the hand and was most affable towards him. Their conversation would have been longer had it not been for the fact that the Duke of An-guo was in a hurry to leave. Zhen did not wish to delay his superior, and himself needed to make hasty preparations the long journey ahead. He therefore forced himself to say farewell and made a dignified departure, escorted by Jia Lian and Bao-yu. All way he was still plying Bao-yu with questions. At last he mounted carriage and was gone, and Jia Lian and Bao-yu returned to report Jia Zheng. When they were dismissed Jia Lian went once more endeavour to settle the accounts for Xi-feng’s funeral.

Bao-yu returned to his own room and told Bao-chai of his encounter with Zhen Ying-jia.

‘I never thought I’d have a chance to see that Zhen Bao-yu we always hearing about, but now I’ve seen his father, and apparend the son will be coming any day to call on Father. Excellency Zhe called me the “living likeness of his son”, which I find hard believe. If this other Bao-yu does come, you must all be sure take a peep at him, and judge whether there really is resemblance.’

‘Shame on you!’ exclaimed Bao-chai. ‘Honestly, you grow more and more thoughtless with every day! First you treat us to a story about some young man who’s supposed to look like you, then you want *us* to go and “take a peep” at him! What next!’

Bao-yu realized that he had said the wrong thing, and blushed. He tried to think of some way of rectifying his gaffe, but to learn more you will have to turn to the next chapter.

CHAPTER 115

A private obsession revived confirms
Xi-chun in an ancient vow
A physical likeness verified deprives
Bao-yu of an imagined friend

Before Bao-yu had time to appease Bao-chai, Ripple came in and announced:

‘The Master wishes to see Bao-yu.’

Bao-yu did not wait for any second hidding.

‘I want to have a word with you,, said Jia Zheng, when he arrived, ‘concerning your studies. You are still in mourning and it would therefore be improper for you to attend school; but you can and must revise your compositions. Over the next few days I shall have some leisure, and I want you to write me a few samples at home. I shall then be able to judge for myself whether in all this time you have made any discernible progress.’

‘Yes, Father,’ said Bao-yu rather miserably.

‘I have instructed your brother Huan and your nephew Lan to revise as well. I sincerely hope that your work will be better than theirs.’

‘Yes, Father.’ Bao-yu dared say nothing more, but stood rooted to the spot.

‘Off with you, then.’

As he withdrew from the study, Bao-yu passed Lai Da and the other stewards coming in with their registers.

He was back in his room like a flash, and communicated the substance of his interview to Bao-chai, who seemed rather pleased to hear it. Bao-yu himself groaned inwardly, but knew that it would be inadvisable to appear idle and was preparing to settle down and concentrate, when two nuns from the Convent of the Saviour King arrived to pay their respects to Bao-chai. She told a maid to bring them tea, but was otherwise decidedly offhand towards them, while Bao-yu, who would have liked to talk with the sisters, could tell that Bao-chai found their company distasteful and therefore refrained. The nuns for their part knew only too well that Bao-chai was unsympathetic to their cause, and after sitting for a short time they excused themselves.

‘Won’t you stay a little longer?’ asked Bao-chai somewhat disingenuously.

‘We have so many calls to make,’ replied one of them. ‘What with the masses we’ve been saying at the Temple of the Iron Threshold, we’ve been kept very busy and haven’t called on Their Ladyships and the young ladies in a very long while. Apart from your good self, we’ve already been to see Mrs Zhu and Their Ladyships, but we still have Miss Xi-chun to call on.’

Bao-chai nodded, and the nuns proceeded to Xi-chun’s apartment. They asked Landscape, who received them, where her mistress could be found.

‘My mistress hasn’t eaten for days,’ exclaimed Landscape, ‘and now she won’t even get up from her bed.’

‘Why? What’s the matter?’

‘Oh, it’s a long story. I’m sure she’ll tell you all about it when you see her.’

Xi-chun had heard them talking as they came in, and sat up at once. ‘How are you both?’ she asked. ‘I suppose you’ve stopped visiting us because our fortunes are so altered …’

‘Holy Name!’ came the pious ejaculation. ‘Benefactors are benefactors, whether they be rich or poor. Our convent was founded by your family, and we were always most generously provided for by Her Old Ladyship. We saw Their Ladyships and the young ladies at Her Old Ladyship’s funeral, but we didn’t see you there, miss, and we were worried about you. That’s why we’ve come here specially to visit you today.’

Xi-chun asked after the young nuns at the temple.

‘Ever since that scandal,’ was the reply, ‘the gatemen won’t let them so much as set foot in Rong-guo House.’

‘Talking of scandals,’ continued the same nun, ‘is it true, what we heard the other day, that Sister Adamantina from **Green** Bower Hermitage has run off with a man?’

‘What utter nonsense!’ replied Xi-chun. ‘People who tell such tales should beware of having their tongues cut out in hell! The poor girl was kidnapped by a gang of ruffians! How can anyone have the heart to spread such malicious gossip!’

‘Sister Adamantina was a strange one all the same,’ said the nun. ‘We always thought she overdid it a bit. Of course, we don’t like to criticize her in front of you, miss. Who are we when compared with her, after all? Just ordinary, unrefined people; we chant our liturgy, say our prayers, make intercession for the sins of others, and hope to earn ourselves a little merit, a little good karma.’

‘What does good karma really mean?’ asked Xi-chun earnestly.

‘Well, miss, putting aside the truly virtuous families like your own, which have nothing to fear, of course - other noble ladies and young misses of good family can never be certain how long their prosperity will last. If calamity once strikes, then nothing can save them. Nothing, that is, except Our Lady of Mercy: if Our Lady

sees a mortal suffering, her infinite compassion moves her to try to guide that mortal towards salvation. That is why we all pray to her and say: "Hail, Lady of Mercy, Bodhisattva of Boundless Compassion and Grace, Deliverer, Saviour, Hail!"

'A nun leads a hard life, it's true, harder than a young lady in a rich family. But we're *saved!* Even if we can't hope to become Buddhas or Saints, at least by keeping up our devotions we may one day in another lifetime he reborn as men. And that would be sufficient reward in itsel£ At least then we would escape the endless trials and silent tribulations of womankind. You are still too young to understand, miss; but let me tell you, when once a young lady leaves home and marries, it is all over with her. She must spend the rest of her days a slave to her husband's will.

'In the true religious life; it is sincere devotion that counts. Sister Adamantina always thought herself so gifted and sensitive, so superior. To her we were always vulgar mortals. And yet ordinary folk like us can at least earn good simple karma, while look at this terrible thing that has befallen her.'

Their words found an all too receptive ear. Uninhibited by the presence of her maids, Xi-chun poured out the whole story of how badly You-shi had been treating her, and how she had been made to stay and look after the house, and the disastrous consequence. She showed them where she had already hacked off a part of her hair.

'You think I'm just another worldling, trapped in the fiery pit of delusion! But you're wrong. I've been wanting to be a nun for a long time myself. I just haven't been able to think of a way of achieving my goal.'

The nuns feigned alarm:

'Now, miss, don't you ever say such a thing again! If Mrs Zhen were to hear, she'd give us the scolding of our lives and have us thrown out of the convent. Why, a young lady like yoursel£ bred in such a good family, you're sure to marry a fine young gentleman and enjoy a lifetime of luxury and ease ...'

The colour flew into Xi-chun's cheeks:

'What makes you think my sister-in-law can have you sent away, and I can't?'

The nuns realized from this that she was in earnest, and decided to goad her on a little further:

'Don't take offence, miss. But do you honestly believe that Their Ladyships and the young mistresses would let you have your way? You will only stir up a lot of unnecessary trouble for yourself. It's you we're thinking of.'

'We shall see,' was Xi-chun's brief comment.

Landscape thought this augured ill, and gave the nuns a meaningful glance. They took the hint, and too scared to lead Xi-chun on any further, made their farewells. Xi-chun did not detain them, but merely smiled scornfully after them and said:

'Don't imagine yours is the only convent!'

The nuns thought it wiser not to reply.

Landscape was worried by this latest turn of events, and fearing that she might be blamed if anything untoward occurred she crept off to inform You-shi:

'Miss Xi-chun is still set on shaving her head and becoming a nun, ma'am. These past few days she's not been ill, she's been lying at home nursing her grievance. Perhaps it would be safer to take some precautions. If anything were to happen, we would be blamed ...'

'She doesn't really want to leave home and take holy vows,' said You-shi. 'She just thinks she can take advantage of Mr Zhen's absence to challenge my authority. Well, so far as I'm concerned, she can go ahead and good luck to her!'

Landscape continued none the less in her efforts to dissuade Xi-chun from her drastic course of action. But Xi-chun persisted in her fast, and her only thought now was to take the final step and cut off what remained of her hair. Landscape could bear it no longer, and went to tell Ladies Xing and Wang. They tried talking Xi-chun out of it several times, but their efforts were in vain. She seemed obsessed.

The two ladies were on the point of going to inform Jia Zheng when one of the servants outside announced the arrival of Lady Zhen and young Master Zhen Bao-yu. They hurried out to welcome their guests and escorted Lady Zhen into Lady Wang's apartment, where they all sat down, formal greetings were exchanged and polite conversation was made, details of which we need not record. Lady Wang made a reference to the supposed resemblance between their two sons, the 'two jades', and expressed a desire to see Zhen Ba~yu for herse£ He was sent for at once, but the answer returned that he was conversing with Sir Zheng in the outer study, and that they seemed to have struck up an immediate rapport. Bao-yu, Huan and Lan had also been summoned to take lunch in the study, and Master Zhen would call on Lady Wang afterwards.

Presently lunch was served for the ladies.

Jia Zheng, having witnessed for himself the physical resemblance between this Zhen Bao-yu and his own son, proceeded to test the young man's literary and scholastic abilities and was most impressed by the fluent answers that he gave. He sent for his own Bao-yu and the other two boys, in order to exhibit to them this paragon of virtue, as both stimulus and admonition, and in particular to afford Bao-yu an opportunity for salutary self-comparison.

Bao-yu answered the summons promptly, and appeared in full mourning-dress, accompanied by Huan and Lan. When he saw Zhen Bao-yu for the first time, it seemed to him almost as if he were being reunited with an old friend, and the feeling of delight was apparently mutual. They bowed to each other, and Huan and Lan followed suit. Jia Zheng had been sitting on a mat on the floor, and had asked Master Zhen on arrival to sit at a chair, an invitation that Master Zhen had (very properly) declined, since his senior was seated at a lower level. Instead he installed himself on a cushion on the floor. Now that Bao-yu and the other two had joined the company, it would hardly be right for them to sit on the floor with Jia Zheng; nor on the other hand could they remain standing while Master Zhen, their contemporary, was seated below. Jia Zheng resolved the dilemma by standing up himself, and after talking with them for a few minutes, he instructed the servants to serve lunch.

'I shall have to leave you now,' he said to Master Zhen. 'Please excuse me. I hand you over to the younger generation, who will learn much from you.'

'It is I, sir,' replied Zhen, with polite modesty, 'who am most anxious to learn from these gentlemen.'

Jia Zheng said a few more words in reply, and then took his leave, politely preventing his young visitor from accompanying him, but allowing Bao-yu, Jia Huan and Jia Lan, who had preceded him and were waiting outside the threshold, to escort him into the irmer study. They returned, prayed Master Zhen to be seated again, and there was a certain amount of conventional chat, with references to this 'long-awaited and much anticipated meeting', details of which we need not record here.

Jia Bao-yu, on seeing Zhen Bao-yu, had instantly been reminded of their earlier dream-encounter 'in the mirror'. From what he knew by report of Zhen Bao-yu, he felt sure that this jade counterpart of his would be a person after his own heart, and that he was destined to find in him a true friend. However, since this was their first 'real' meeting, and since Huan and Lan were present, he felt the need to be somewhat discreet, and therefore addressed him in the polite hyperboles customary on such occasions:

'Long have I admired you from afar, but alas till now I have been denied the honour of a personal acquaintance. Today this great blessing is mine, and lo, I see before me a reincarnation of the Great Bard, a second Li Bo!'

Zhen Bao-yu had also heard a great deal about his namesake, and found that the reality conformed pretty much to his expectations.

'He seems a passable companion in my studies,' he thought to himself, 'but hardly someone to share my aspirations. And yet he has my name, and looks so like me; we must be souls linked by some bond at the Rock of Rebirth. I have made some progress of late in the understanding of Higher Principles, and should therefore seek to impart to him something of what I have learned. Since this is only our first meeting, however, and since I am still ignorant where his sympathies lie, I should tread cautiously.'

He replied to Jia Bao-yu's remarks in what he deemed to be a fitting vein:

'Long have I known of your great gifts. I fear that, before a person of such egregious purity, refinement and grace, I am but an ordinary and foolish mortal, and that by sharing your name I do but tarnish its lustre.'

'He seems a sympathetic enough character,' pondered Jia Bao-yu upon hearing this. 'But why does he flatter me almost as if I were a girl? We are both of us men, and therefore creatures of impurity.'

'Your praise is alas undeserved,' he said. 'I am but a dull and foolish creature, a mere lump of senseless stone! How can I compare with a person of such quality and nobility as yourself? It is I who am unworthy of the name that we both bear.'

'When I was young,' mused Zhen Bao-yu aloud for his new friend's benefit, 'I was blind to my own limitations and entertained ideas far above my station. But then my family fell on hard times, and we have all spent the past few years in greatly reduced circumstances. As a result, although I can hardly lay claim to a comprehensive experience of life's vicissitudes, I feel I may have acquired some slight knowledge of the ways of the world, some meagre understanding of human nature. You, on the other hand, have lived in the lap of luxury all your life, you have lacked for nothing, and you have, I am sure, been able to achieve great distinction in your literary compositions and in the study of public affairs, a distinction that has caused your honourable father to hold you in high esteem, and to view you with great pride and affection. I say again, *you* are worthy of the fine name that we both bear.'

Jia Bao-yu recognized by now the telltale rhetoric of the 'career worm' and fell silent, wondering how best to respond, while Jia Huan for his part began to feel uncomfortable at having been so entirely excluded from the conversation. Jia Lan, however, found Zhen Bao-yu's little sermon most congenial:

'You are altogether too modest, sir. Surely, in the fields of literary composition and public affairs of which you speak, it is precisely from long experience that true ability and knowledge are derived. I am of course too young to claim any knowledge of literary composition, but a careful perusal of the little that I have read has led me to the conclusion that external grace and meretricious refinement are of little worth when compared with the cultivation of a good character.'

Jia Bao-yu found his nephew's remarks nauseatingly priggish, and wondered where on earth he had picked up this way of speaking. He attempted to forestall a reply in like vein from Zhen Bao-yu:

'I had always understood from what I had heard of you that you condemned vulgar and commonplace notions, and had formed your own personal view of the world. I was so happy to have had this opportunity of meeting you today, and of learning from you something that would help me transcend this mortal realm we live in and enter a more spiritual plane. I felt sure that such an encounter would help to cleanse my heart of worldly desires, and open my eyes to a more profound view of life. Alas, it is clear from your words that you consider me a coarse creature, and have therefore treated me out of politeness to this rigmarole 6f worldly wisdom.'

Young Zhen reflected:

'Clearly he has heard tales of me as a child, and therefore thinks that I was speaking out of mere politeness, masking my true nature. I must be frank with him. Who knows, he may even turn out to be a true friend.'

'I fully appreciate the sincerity of your remarks,' he began. 'When I was young, I too abhorred anything that smacked of the platitude and the cliche. But I grew older, and when my father resigned from his post and had little further inclination for social entertaining, the role of host devolved upon me. In the course of my duties I observed that each one of the distinguished gentlemen whom I met had in one way or another brought honour and glory to his family name. All their written works or spoken words were of l6yalty and filial piety, their entire lives were devoted to virtue and truth and were indeed a fitting tribute to the enlightened rule under which we live and a due token of gratitude for the kind and illuminating instruction bestowed upon them by their fathers and teachers alike. So gradually I cast off the intractable theories and foolish passions of my youth. I am still searching for teachers and friends of a like mind to instruct me and guide me out of my benighted

ignorance, and I consider it a great blessing to have met you. I feel sure that I have much to learn from you. Believe me, what I said earlier was in earnest.'

The more Jia Bao-yu heard the more exasperated he felt. For politeness' sake he mumbled something ambiguous in reply, and was saved from further embarrassment by a summons from the inner apartments:

'If the gentlemen have eaten, would Mr Zhen please join the ladies?'

Bao-yu seized this opportunity, promptly inviting Zhen Bao-yu to lead the way, and they proceeded to Lady Wang's apartment, followed by the other boys. Seeing Lady Zhen seated in the place of honour, Jia Bao-yu paid her his respects, Jia Huan and Jia Lan followed suit, and Zhen Bao-yu likewise paid his respects to Lady Wang. At last the two ladies and their two 'jades' were face to face. Although Jia Bao-yu was now married, Lady Zhen was old enough not to have to stand on ceremony on that account, especially as the connection between their two families was such a long-standing one. She saw how alike the two of them were, and could not help warming towards Jia Bao-yu; with Lady Wang it was the same, she took Zhen Bao-yu by the hand and plied him with questions, finding him rather more mature than her own son. She glanced at Jia Lan, and reflected to herself that he too cut a fine figure; though not quite on a level with the two 'jades', he could certainly hold his own in their company. Jia Huan's uncouth appearance, on the other hand, aroused all her old antipathy.

When it became known that both 'jades' were present together, all the maids came to have a look.

'How extraordinary!' they murmured to one another. 'It's one thing for them to have the same name; but they even *look* alike - face, build, everything! Luckily *our* Bao-yu is dressed in mourning white or we'd never be able to tell them apart!'

Nightingale in particular seemed momentarily quite stunned. She was thinking of Dai-yu:

'If only she were still alive! They might have married her to *this* Bao-yu. I think she'd have been willing enough...,'

Even as these thoughts were running through her head, she heard Lady Zhen say: 'A few days ago, I believe my husband, who now considers *our* Bao-yu of an age to be married, asked Sir Zheng to look out for a suitable bride for him.'

Lady Wang was already much taken with Zhen Bao-yu and without any hesitation she replied:

'I should be glad to act as a matchmaker for your son. Of our own girls, two have passed away, and one is already married. Cousin Zhen of Ning-guo House has an unmarried younger sister, but she is a few years too young for the match. I have another idea, though My elder daughter-in-law, a member of the Li family by birth, ha' two cousins, both fine good-looking girls. The older of the two already betrothed, but the younger is not and would make an excellent bride for your son. I will make the proposal on your behalf. I ought perhaps to mention that their family circumstances are somewhat reduced.'

'You are being unnecessarily polite,' said Lady Zhen. 'Nowadays, we are nothing to boast about ourselves. In fact *they* may consider us beneath them.'

'But your husband has been given this new commission,' said Lady Wang, 'and I feel certain that in the future he will not only be restored to his former prosperity, but will rise to new heights of glory.'

Lady Zhen smiled:

'I only hope your predictions come true. Well, in that case, I should be most grateful if you would propose the match on our behalf.'

Zhen Bao-yu, on hearing them broach the subject of his betrothal, excused himself and was escorted by Jia Bao-yu and the other boys back to the study, where they rejoined Jia Zheng and stood for a while talking. Presently one of the Zhen servants came to summon Zhen Bao-yu:

'Lady Zhen is leaving now, sir, and requests you to return.'

Zhen Bao-yu made his farewell, and Jia Zheng instructed Bao-yu, Jia Huan and Jia Lan to see him out. And there we must leave him.

Ever since his earlier encounter with Zhen Bao-yu's father, Jia Bao-yu had been looking forward impatiently to the arrival of his supposed *alter ego*, hoping to find in him a true friend. Now that they had met, he was sorely disillusioned, realizing from their conversation that the two of them were poles apart, as far removed from each other as the proverbial ice and coal. He made his way back to his apartment in a mood of profound depression, said not a word, did not even smile, but stared vacantly into space.

'Well?' asked Bao-chai. *'Is* he your "living likeness" then?'

'He certainly looks like me,' replied Bao-yu. 'But I could tell from the way he talked that he was a fool, just another career worm.

'There you go, finding fault again!' protested Bao-chai. 'How can you suddenly know that he's a career worm?'

'He talked a lot,' replied Bao-yu, 'and there was nothing the slightest bit profound or illuminating in what he said; he just spouted on at me about "literary composition and public affairs", and "loyalty and filial piety". Isn't that the way a worm talks? It's a shame that he looks like me; now that I know what he's like, I wish I could look different ...'

Bao-chai could see he was on one of his hobbyhorses again:

'The things you say are really laughable! How could you possibly look different? What's more, his ideas sound very right and proper to me. A man should want to set himself up in life and amount to something. Just because you're so sentimental and wrapped up in your own feelings, does that mean that everyone else has to be too? You attack him for being a worm, when it's really you who have no strength of character!'

Bao-yu had found Zhen Bao-yu's Sermon exasperating enough. With Bao-chai's diatribe on top of it, he felt himself rapidly sinking into a slough of despond. A familiar feeling of overwhelming muzziness seemed to descend on him, and he could sense a relapse coming on. He said nothing, but smiled inanely, to the bewilderment of Bao-chai. She surmised that he was smiling to mask his annoyance with her harsh words, and therefore decided to ignore him. But for the rest of that day he remained in the same stupor, refusing to speak even if Aroma or one of the others deliberately provoked him, and when he rose the next morning he looked exactly as he had done before his recent convalescence.

Lady Wang meanwhile had finally concluded that she must inform Jia Zheng of Xi-chun's determination to shave her head and take holy vows. You-shi had proved incapable of dissuading her and seemed likely that any further opposition to her will would only drive her to suicide. They were keeping a watch on her day and night, but this was just a temporary measure. She and her aspirations could not be contained in this way for ever. Jia Zheng sighed and stamped his foot:

'Goodness only knows what Ning-guo House has done to deserve an end like this!'

He sent for Jia Rong:

'Go and tell your mother that she must make one last determine' effort to talk Xi-chun round. Then if the girl persists in her folly, will simply have to act as if she is no longer one of our family.'

You-shi did as she was instructed, but her efforts had the very opposite effect, and only elicited more threats of suicide from Xi-chun.

'I'm a girl and you know I can't stay at home for the rest of life. What if I were to end up with a marriage like Ying-chun Look at all the heartache she caused her parents, and Uncle Zheng and Auntie Wang, and then she died... If you love me, think of *me* as dead, let me go, let me at least *try* to make something pure of my life. I won't be living away from home anyway, I'll only be in **Green** Bower Hermitage, which is part of the Garden. Adamantina's women are still living there. *That* can be my nunnery. You can look after my needs there. Please let me do this, and I shall think myself blessed. By continuing to go against me, you will be forcing me to put an end to my life. If I am allowed to follow my own chosen path, then when my brother returns I shall tell him plainly that I did it of my own free will. But if I die, he's sure to say you drove me to my death.'

There had always been discord between You-shi and Xi-chun, and besides, You-shi could see the force of her argument. She went to report to Lady Wang. But Lady Wang was in Bao-chai's apartment, where she had just discovered for herself the recent deterioration in Bao-yu's condition, and was upbraiding Aroma:

'You are altogether too careless! You should have told me at once when Bao-yu fell ill!'

'But your Ladyship,' pleaded Aroma, 'Bao-yu is often ill--some days he may be better, then he's worse again. He's been visiting you and paying his morning duty every day and really he's been quite all right until today, when he seems to have had a bit of a queer turn. Mrs Bao was going to come over and tell you, only she didn't want you to scold us for making a fuss about nothing.'

This scolding of Aroma's, and the fear that she and Bao-chai might suffer on his behalf, seemed to restore Bao-yu temporarily to his senses:

'Don't worry, Mother. There's nothing the matter with me. I just feel a bit low.'

'My child, you mustn't forget you have a tendency to take ill. If only I'd known earlier, I could have sent for a doctor and had some proper medicine prescribed for you in time. If you allow yourself to sink into the dreadful state you were in after you lost your jade, you'll cause us no end of trouble again!'

'If you're still worried, Mother,' said Bao-yu, 'then by all means send for a doctor and I'll take some medicine.'

Lady Wang accordingly sent a maid to fetch a doctor, and was thus far too preoccupied with Bao-yu to think of Xi-chun's predicament. The doctor arrived presently, examined Bao-yu and made out a prescription, after the administration of which Lady Wang returned to her own apartment.

Over the next few days, however, Bao-yu seemed to become more of an imbecile than ever. He stopped eating completly, and his condition began to cause general concern. When the time came for the ceremony to mark the end of the formal mourning period for Grandmother Jia, and since the family were especially busy at the temple, Jia Yun was called in to receive Bao-yu's doctor; and because of the shortage of men in Jia Lian's compound, Wang Ren also had to be asked to attend and help supervise there. Qiao-jie had made herself ill crying day and night for her mother, and in every respect Rong-guo House presented a picture of sad disarray.

When the family returned from the service at the temple, Lady Wang went at once to visit Bao-yu. She found that his condition had greatly deteriorated. He was unconscious, and the servants were in a helpless panic; some were standing there in tears, some had already gone to Jia Zheng's, where they announced:

'The doctor says it's a waste of time to prescribe any more medicine, and we must be prepared for the worst ...'

Jia Zheng heaved a bitter sigh and went to inspect for himself. Bao-yu indeed showed every sign of being at death's door, and Jia Zheng ordered Jia Lian to make the necessary preparations. Jia Lian did not dare gainsay him, and reluctantly gave instructions for Bao-yu's last things to be prepared. He was just wondering how they could possibly raise the money for yet another funeral, when one of the servants rushed into the room in a state of great agitation, crying:

'Mr Lian! Something terrible! Another disaster!'

Jia Lian had no notion what the man could be referring to and stared at him transfixed with fear:

'What is it?'

'There's a monk at the gate and he says he's brought back Mt Bao's lost lade. He wants ten thousand taels for it…'

Jia Lian spat in the servant's face:

'Hng! I thought from the fluster you were in that it was something serious. Didn't you hear about that last hoax? And even if this jade *were* genuine, what good could it do now, when the boy's already past hope?'

'That's what I said myself, sir. But the monk swore that Mr Bao would be cured as soon as we paid him the money.

As he was speaking, another servant rushed in crying:

‘The monk’s gone berserk! He’s crashing his way in and none us can stop him!’

‘This is unbelievable!’ exclaimed Jia Lian. ‘Send him packing this instant!’

When he learned what had happened, Jia Zheng was as flummoxed as Jia Lian. Meanwhile more cries came from within:

‘Bao-yu is sinking!’

Jia Zheng was growing desperate, when he heard the monk’s voice calling:

‘If you want the boy to live, just bring me the money!’

Jia Zheng suddenly thought:

‘It was a monk who cured Bao-yu’s earlier illness; perhaps this monk can save him after all. But if the jade *is* genuine, how will we ever raise the money for it?’

After a moment’s reflection, he concluded to himself:

‘Oh well, we can think of that in due course. Let’s cure him first, and bargain later.’

By the time he had reached this decision and despatched a servant with an invitation, the monk was already on his way, and without so much as a bow or a word of acknowledgement went striding into Bao-yu’s room. Jia Lian tried to restrain him, saying:

‘There are ladies in there! A tramp like you can’t go barging in!’

‘Any delay,’ cried the monk, ‘and it may be too late to save him!’ Jia Lian was too flustered to be able to do anything but follow him, calling out in confusion:

‘Quiet now! Stop your weeping! The monk has arrived!’

He continued calling out like this, but Lady Wang and the others were far too overwrought by Bao-yu’s condition to pay him any attention. When eventually they did look round, they were shocked to see the great burly figure of the monk descending on them, and at the last moment tried unsuccessfully to conceal themselves, while the monk made straight for the kang on which Bao-yu lay. Bao-chai withdrew to one side, but Aroma felt she should stay with Lady Wang, who had remained standing where she was.

‘Ladies, I have brought the jade,’ proclaimed the monk.

He held it up, as he continued:

‘Give me the money, and I can save the lad.’

Shock had utterly incapacitated Lady Wang, and she and the other ladies were certainly in no fit state to judge the authenticity of the stone exhibited to them.

‘Just save him,’ they cried, ‘and the money will be yours!’

The monk laughed.

‘I want it now!’

‘Don’t worry,’ said Lady Wang. ‘You shall have the money without fail, even if we have to pawn everything we have.’

The monk seemed to find this suggestion hysterically funny, and after a good deal of laughter he held the jade out in one hand, bent down and whispered in Bao-yu’s ear:

‘Bao-yu! Precious Jade! Your Stone has returned!’

No sooner had he spoken than Bao-yu opened his eyes a slit.

‘He lives!’ cried Aroma ecstatically.

‘Where is it?’ asked Bao-yu.

The monk placed the jade in Bao-yu’s hand.

At first Bao-ya clutched it tightly, then slowly he turned his hand palm upwards and brought the Stone up to eye-level. He peered at it closely and exclaimed:

‘Ah! We are reunited at last!’

Everyone began uttering fervent prayers to the Lord Buddha, and even Bao-chai now seemed oblivious of the monk’s male presence. Jia Lian came across to see what had happened, and the sight of a revivified Bao-yu

brought momentary cheer to his heart too. Suddenly he slipped out**,** and without a word the monk raced after him and overtook him. Jia Lian had no choice but to escort the monk to the reception hall and then hurry over to inform Jia Zheng; who was enormously relieved by the news, and sent for the monk straight away, bowing to him and expressing his profound thanks. The monk returned the salutation and sat down. Jia Lian thought himself apprehensively:

'Now he won't budge till he's been paid...'

Jia Zheng scrutinized the monk. It was not, he concluded, one the two he had seen on the previous occasion.

'From which holy establishment do you hail?' he enquired. 'And what pray is your reverend's own name in religion? Where did obtain my son's stone talisman? How is it that the sight of it cured him so quickly?'

The monk greeted this stream of questions with an inscrutable smile:

'Don't ask me. I have not the slightest idea. Just give me my thousand taels, and we'll call it a day.'

Jia Zheng could see he was dealing with rather a brusque sort of fellow, and was nervous of offending him:

'The money? Why yes, of course you shall have it ...'

'I'd like it now. I'm in a hurry.'

'Please be seated for a moment, while I go in and see whether it is ready.'

'You'd better get a move on.'

Jia Zheng went in to the others. He said nothing of his interview with the monk but went straight to the kang where Bao-yu was lying. When Bao-yu saw his father coming, he tried to raise himself up, but was too weak to do so. Lady Wang held him down and told him on no account to move, while Bao-yu smiled from where he lay and handed the jade to his father, with the words:

'You see, *Bao-yu* has returned!'

J ia Zheng was aware of the Stone's reputedly supernatural properties. He glanced at it and said to Lady Wang:

'Now that Bao-yu has recovered consciousness, how are we to pay the monk?'

'Pawn everything I own!' replied Lady Wang at once. 'That should be enough.'

'I hardly think he wants money,' put in Bao-yu. 'Do you?'

Jia Zheng nodded thoughtfully:

'I thought it rather strange, I must say. But he absolutely insists.'

'You must go out and entertain him,' said Lady Wang. 'We'll see what we can do.'

As Jia Zheng went out, Bao-yu began clamouring for food. First he consumed a bowl of congee and then he demanded some rice, which the old women even brought him. But Lady Wang forbade him to eat it.

'It'll be perfectly all right,' protested Bao-yu. 'I'm better now.' He leant forwards and promptly tucked into a bowl of rice. His spirits seemed greatly revived. He wanted to sit up properly, and Musk came forward and supported him gently. Carried away by her excitement at his recovery she blurted out:

'What a treasure that Stone of yours is! Just *seeing* it has made you better! Thank goodness you never managed to smash it to pieces!'

Her words caused a sudden change to come over Bao-yu's face. He threw the Stone aside and slumped back. But to learn if he survived, you must turn to the next chapter.

CHAPTER 116

Human destinies are reveald in a fairy realm,
and the Stone is restored to its rightful owner
Mortal remains are transported to their terrestrial home,

Musk's untimely reference to a sensitive episode from the past sent Bao-yu into a sudden swoon and he slumped back onto his bed once more. Lady Wang and the assembled family broke into a fresh bout of wailing and weeping, while Musk herself, realizing that her thoughtlessness was to blame for this terrible turn (though Lady Wang had not yet had time to scold her), began to weep and at the same time made a desperate resolution:

'If Bao-yu dies, I shall take my own life and die with him!'

Lady Wang could see that this time none of their efforts to rouse Bao-yu was having any effect, and sent an urgent message to the monk, begging him to come to the rescue again. But the monk was nowhere to be seen. Jia Zheng had returned earlier to the hall, only to find that his eccentric guest had vanished into thin air. This fresh outcry from the inner apartment now reached Jia Zheng's ears and he hurried back, to find Bao-yu unconscious again, teeth clenched and with no trace of a pulse. He felt his chest, and finding it still quite warm, sent in desperation for a doctor, to attempt resuscitation by forcing down a draught of some kind.

But Bao-yu's spirit had already quit its mortal frame. Then that means he was dead, you say? The exact situation, dear Reader, was as follows: the spirit had flitted in its incorporeal fashion out to reception hall, where it saw the jade-bearing monk and saluted him with a bow. The monk hurriedly rose to his feet, grasped the spirit the hand and set off. Bao-yu (spirit) followed, light as a leaf drifting the breeze. They made their way out not by the main entrance but by a route he failed to recognize, and presently they reached an open a wilderness, whence in the far distance he spied a strangely familiar monumental archway. He was on the point of asking the monk what was, when a misty female form came gliding towards him.

'What is a beautiful creature like that doing in such a desolate place as this?' Bao-yu asked himself. 'She must be some goddess come to earth.'

He approached her and looked more closely. Her face was as familiar as the archway had been, but somehow he was unable to remember exactly who she was. She greeted the monk, and then in an instant vanished from view. In that same instant Bao-yu knew who it was that she resembled: You San-jie. More puzzled than ever (for what could *she* be doing here?), he wanted to question the monk. But before he could do so, the monk was leading him by the hand on through the archway. On the lintel of the arch were inscribed in large characters the words:

THE PARADISE OF TRUTH

A couplet in smaller characters ran down on either side:

When Fiction departs and Truth appears,
Truth prevails;
Though Not-real was once Real, the Real
is never unreal.

Having negotiated the archway, they presently came to the gate of a palace, above which ran a horizontal inscription:

Blessing for the Virtuous; Misfortune for the Wicked

whilst the following words were inscribed vertically on the two sides:

Human Wit can ne'er unveil the Mysteries of Time,
Nor closest Kin defy the Stern Decrees of Fate.

'So ....' thought Bao-yu to himsel£ 'It is time I began to learn more about the operation of fate.' Even as this thought was passing through his mind, he saw (of all people) Faithful standing a little way *off*, beckoning and calling to him.

'All this time and I'm still at home in the Garden!' he reflected in astonishment. 'But why is it so changed?'

He hurried forward to speak to Faithiul, but a second later she too had vanished and he was left standing there, more perplexed than ever. He continued to advance towards the place where Faithful had been, and as he did so he observed a range of buildings on either side of him, and above the entrance to each building a board proclaiming its name. He felt no great inclination to inspect any of these buildings closely, but hurried on in quest of Faithful. The entrance beyond the spot where she had stood was ajar, but he did not dare to enter, thinking he should consult his guide first. And yet when he turned to find him, the monk had vanished. The buildings all around him suddenly seemed very grand, and it began to occur to Bao-yu that perhaps this was not Prospect Garden after all. He stood still and raised his head to read the words above the doorway immediately in front of him:

AWAKEN FROM LOVE'S FOLLY

The couplet on either side ran:

Smiles of gladness, tears of woe, all are false;
Every lust and every longing stems from folly.

Bao-yu nodded his head and sighed. He still wanted to enter the doorway and go in search of Faithful, to ask her what this place was that he had come to. He felt a growing certainty that he had been here on some previous occasion. Finally he plucked up the courage to push the door open, and went in. There was no sign whatsoever of Faithful. It was pitch dark inside and he was about to give in to fear and retrace his steps when his eyes discerned, looming in the darkness, the shapes of a dozen large cupboards, their doors apparently pushed to but unlocked. A sudden realization swept over him:

'I *know* I've been somewhere like this before. I remember it now. It was in a dream. What a blessing this is, to return to the scene of my childhood dream!'

Somehow in his confusion his original intention of finding Faithful had gone, giving way to a new and more generalized curiosity about what lay before him. He plucked up his courage again and opened the door of the first cupboard. Within it he saw a number of albums, and a thrill of excited delight ran through him.

'People always say that dreams are false,' he thought to himself. 'But it seems that this one was real! How often I've wished I could dream that dream of mine again! And now here I am, and my wish is coming true. I wonder if these are the very albums I saw?'

Stretching out his hand he took the top one, and held it in his hand. It bore the label 'Jinling, Twelve Beauties of, Main Register.

'I *do* remember seeing this,' he thought to himself. 'I think I do... If only I could remember more clearly!'

He opened it at the first page, and found himself looking at a picture, but one that was so blurred he could hardly tell what it represented. There followed a few rows of characters, written in an almost indecipherable hand, among which he could faintly trace the forms of 'jade belt' *(dai yu)* and '**green**wood' *(lin)*.

'Surely that must be a riddle for Cousin Lin?' he thought to himself, and read on in earnest. The next line

contained the words ‘the gold pin beneath the snow (xue)’.

‘Why that’s Bao-chai’s surname!’ he exclaimed aloud.

He read to the end of the fourth and last line.

‘It doesn’t seem to say very much. It’s just a series of riddles on the names Lin Dai-yu and Xue Bao-chai. There’s nothing very exceptional about that. But some of the phrases sound rather ominous. I wonder what it’s all supposed to mean?

‘Silly me! I’m not really supposed to be here at all,’ he rebuked himself. ‘If I spend my time daydreaming like this and someone comes, I’ll have wasted my chance to look through the rest.’

He continued his inspection of the albums. He did not allow himself time to linger over the next picture, but went straight to the poem, which ended with the words:

When hare meets tiger, your great dream shall end.

They brought a sudden burst of illumination:

‘What a brilliant prediction! It must refer to the death of my eldest sister. If they are all as clear as this, I should copy them down and study them carefully. That way I can find out everything about my sisters and cousins, how long they’re going to live, whether they will fail or succeed in life, be wealthy or poor. At home I shall have to keep my knowledge a secret of course. But my inside information will at least save *me* a lot of unnecessary worrying ..’

He looked everywhere for writing implements, but could see neither brush nor inkstone, and fearing that someone might surprise him, he hurriedly scanned through the rest of the album. The next leaf bore an impressionistic representation of a figure flying a kite. He did not feel in the mood to dwell on the pictures but quickly read the remaining poems in the set of twelve. In some cases he was able to grasp the hidden meaning at a first reading, others required a moment’s reflection, while some remained obstinately unintelligible. He committed all of them carefully to memory none the less. With a sigh he took out the next album, labelled ‘Supplementary Register No. 1’, and began to read. He stopped at the lines:

You chose the player fortune favoured,
Unmindful of your master’s doom.

At first they meant nothing to him. Then he studied the accompanying picture, a bunch of flowers and a mat painted in the same impressionistic style as the kite-flying girl. Suddenly he burst into tears.(* See Volume I, Appendix, p. 527.)

He was about to read further, when he heard a voice saying:

‘Daydreaming again! Come now, Cousin Lin wants to see you.’ The voice was very like Faithful’s, but when he turned to look, to his great bewilderment there was no one there. Then suddenly he saw Faithful again, standing outside the doorway and beckoning to him. He ran out after her in delight, but her shadowy form drifted constantly ahead of him and he was unable to overtake her.

‘Dear Faithful! Please wait for me!’ he cried.

She took no notice but hurried on ahead, while he ran panting after her. Suddenly another vista loomed in front of him, of high buildings and intricately carved roofs, among which he could dimly perceive the figures of palace ladies. In his eagerness to explore this new realm Bao-yu forgot Faithful completely. Wandering in through one of the gateways, he found himself among all sorts of strange and exotic plants and flowers, none of which he could identify. One in particular caught his eye, a herbaceous plant surrounded by a marble balustrade, the tips of its leaves tinged a faint **red.**

‘What rare plant can that be,’ he wondered, ‘to be accorded such place of honour?’

A gentle breeze had arisen and the plant fluttered its leaves with long drawn-out trembling motion. It was small and flowerless, its delicate charm held Bao-yu's heart spellbound and enraptured soul. He was still staring at it dumbfounded when a voice beside hir:

spoke:

'Where are you from, you great booby? And what do you thini you're doing peeping at our Fairy Plant?'

Startled from his reverie, Bao-yu turned to see a fairy maide:

standing at his side. He bowed and said in reply to her questions:

'I came here to find Faithful. Excuse me if I have clumsily trespassed on your fairy domain. Please can you tell me, Sister Fairy, what this place is, and why Faithful said that Cousin Lin wanted to see me? Please will you explain?'

'Sister this, Cousin that! Such names mean nothing td me!' replied the fairy. 'All I know is that this Fairy Plant is my responsibility, and that it is strictly forbidden for mortals like you to loiter here. You must leave at once.'

Bao-yu could not bring himself to obey the fairy's command.

'Sister Fairy!' he pleaded once more. '*If* you are in charge of a Fairy Plant, then you must be a Flower Fairy yourself. Can you tell me: what is so special about *this* particular plant?'

'That's a very long story,' replied the fairy. 'Once it grew by the banks of the Magic River and then it was called the **Crimson** Pearl Flower. It wilted and began to die, but was revived and given immortal life through the intervention of the Divine Luminescent Page-in-waiting, who generously watered it with sweet dew. Afterwards it descended into the world of men to repay its debt with the tears of a lifetime, and now that this has been done it has returned to its true abode. Fairy Disenchantment has given me instructions to tend it and to stop the bees and butterflies from molesting it ...

Bao-yu still did not understand. He had a growing conviction that this really must be a Flower Fairy that he had met, and was determined not to let such a rare opportunity slip through his hands. He asked her politely:

'So you, Sister Fairy, are in charge of this plant. But each of the many other fine flowers must have its own fairy4n-attendance. I hate to bother you, but I wonder if you could tell me which fairy is in charge of the Hibiscus?'

'I don't know. You'll have to ask my mistress about that.'

'Who is your mistress, pray~'

'My mistress is the River Queen.'

'I knew it!' exclaimed Bao-yu. 'That's my cousin Lin Dai-yu!'

'Stuff and nonsense!' retorted the by now highly exasperated fairy. 'May I remind you again that this is a heavenly realm and the abode of fairies. My mistress may be called the River Queen, but she is nothing like your earthly queens and consorts. How could she possibly be related to a mortal? Stop talking such utter nonsense or I shall have you beaten and thrown out by one of our guards.'

Bao-yu was struck dumb by the fairy's words and became painfully conscious of his own uncleanliness. He was taking his leave when he heard someone hurrying towards them, calling:

'They're asking for the Divine Luminescent Page-in-waiting!'

'I know,' replied the fairy. 'I was told to look out for him. That's why I've been waiting here all this time. But I haven't seen any such Page go by. So what am I to do?'

'Surely that was him - the one who left just now!' cried the messenger with a laugh, and rushed out to waylay Bao-yu.

‘Will it please the Divine Luminescent Page-in-waiting to return?’

Bao-yu thought she must be addressing someone else. He was afraid of being overtaken and caught, and continued stumbling forwards, in an effort to make good his escape. When he looked up, he saw before him a formidable figure barring his way with a large sword:

‘Where are you going?’

Bao-yu was frightened out of his wits, but managed to pluck up enough courage to take another l6ok. He was astonished, and then somewhat reassured, to find himself face to face with You San-jie.

‘Oh Cousin!’ he begged her. ‘Why are you after me too?’

‘You men, you’re all the same!’ was her reply. ‘There’s not a good one in your entire family. You ruin a girl’s reputation, then you destroy her marriage. Well I’ve got you now, and you won’t escape me!’

Bao-yu could tell that she was in deadly earnest and was beginning to panic when he heard another voice behind him saying:

‘Sister! Stop that man at once! He must not be allowed to leave!’

‘I have my orders from the Rivet Queen,’ replied San-jie, ‘and I’ve been waiting a long while for something like this. Now you’re in my grasp, and with one blow of my sword I shall sever the ties that bind you to the mortal world.’

Bao-yu was terrified. He could not understand what she was saying, and turned and fled, only to see that the face from which the voice behind him had issued was that of Skybright. Joy and sorrow mingled in his heart.

‘I’m lost!’ he cried pathetically. ‘I’m all on my own and I seem to have run into the arms of the enemy. I wanted to escape and go home, but I couldn’t find any of you to take me back. Now I shall be safe! Dear Skybright, please will you take me home now?’

‘You must not lose heart,’ replied the maiden. ‘I am not Skybright. I have been specially commissioned by our Queen to escort you into her presence. I will not do you any harm.’

Bao-yu was now utterly bewildered:

‘You say your Queen sent you; but who *is* your Queen?’

‘Don’t ask now,’ replied Skybright. ‘Soon you will see for your-self.’

Helplessly Bao-yu followed her, and as they walked he studied her more closely. She resembled Skybright in every detail.

‘Her face, her eyes, her voice are all Skybright’s!’ he reflected to himself. ‘How can she say she isn’t Skybright? Oh dear, I’m in such a muddle. I’d better take no notice of what she says. Whatever it is that I’ve done wrong, when I am admitted into the presence of her Queen, I can ask her to help. Women have kind hearts, after all. She will surely forgive me.’

They had now reached a magnificent palace, lavishly and brilliantly appointed in every respect. In the courtyard before them grew a clump of bright **green** bamboo, while by the main doorway stood a row of dark pine-trees. There were several ladies-in-waiting standing under the eaves, dressed in fine palace robes, and when they saw Bao-yu come in they began whispering among themselves:

‘Is *that* the Divine Luminescent Page?’

Bao-yu’s attendant informed them:

‘It is, so you’d better hurry in and announce his arrival.’

One of the ladies beckoned to Bao-yu with a smile, and he followed her in through several apartments, till finally they arrived at what seemed to be the entrance to the main hall of the palace. It was hung with a pearl blind. Stopping before this blind, the lady-in-waiting turned to Bao-yu and said:

‘Wait here for your instructions from Her Majesty.’

Bao-yu did not dare breathe a word, but waited obediently outside the doorway. Presently the lady-in-waiting returned and announced:

‘Will the Page please enter now for his audience?’

Another attendant began to roll up the pearl blind, and as she did so Bao-yu caught sight of a regal figure seated within, dressed in richly embroidered robes and wearing a crown of flowers on her head. Raising his head a fraction to look more closely, he saw that the Queen did indeed resemble Dai-yu and cried out impulsively:

‘Here you are at last, Coz! Oh how I’ve missed you!’

The lady-in-waiting outside the blind whispered in a shocked tone:

‘Ill-mannered Page! Out with you at once!’

She had barely said this when the other attendant lowered blind again. Bao-yu was too scared to go in, and yet the though leaving was inconceivable. He wanted to ask one of the other lad in-waiting for an explanation, but when he looked round he realized that they were all of them strangers. They were forcing him out and he had no choice but to leave. He thought as a last resort trying to ask ‘Skybright’, but when he looked for her she was where to be seen. A deep feeling of confusion and foreboding descended on him and he dragged himself dejectedly away, this without a guide. There was no trace of the way by which he come and he was beginning to wonder if he would ever be able to find his way hack, when to his delight he saw the figure of Xi-feng beckoning to him from beneath the eaves of another building.

‘Thank goodness! I’m home again! How could I have lost bearings so quickly?’

He rushed up to her:

‘Here you are! They’ve all been so cruel to me, and Cousin wouldn’t see me. I don’t know why!’

He was standing right next to Xi-feng. But on closer inspection turned out not to be Xi-feng at all but Jia Rong’s first wife, Qin Ke-qing. He hesitated for a moment and then asked her where Xi-feng had gone. But the lady made no reply and presently turned and inside.

Bao-yu stood there in a daze, not daring to follow her in, staring blankly before him.

‘What have I done wrong today,’ he sighed, ‘that I should spurned like this wherever I turn?’

Just as he was bursting into tears, a cohort of guards in **yellow** turbans with whips in their hands descended upon him.

‘Where are you from, and who do you think you are to cot sneaking into this fairy realm? Off with you! Be gone!’

Bao-yu did not dare say a word, but continued to search for a way out of the place. In the far distance he spied a crowd of 1’ laughing and walking in his direction, and thought to his relief he could recognize among them Ying-chun and some of his other cousins.

‘Help!’ he cried. ‘I’m lost! Save me!’

Even as he shouted, the guards continued relentlessly to push him on from behind, and he stumbled helplessly forward. Then to his horror he saw that his ‘cousins’ had been transformed into strange ghoulish monsters and were pursuing him too. His nerves were at breaking point. Suddenly the monk appeared before him, and shone a mirror in his face:

‘By the order of Her Grace the Imperial Jia Concubine I have come to save you!’

In a trice the monsters vanished, and Bao-yu was spirited back to the bleak stretch of wilderness from which he had first entered the fairy domain. He grasped the monk’s hand:

‘You brought me here - that I can remember; and then the next thing I knew you had vanished and I saw some of my family but they would have nothing to do with me and in the end they turned into monsters! Was it all a dream, or was it real? Please, Master, I beg you to tell me the truth.’

‘When you first entered this place,’ said the monk, ‘did you steal a look at anything in

particular?'

Bao-yu thought for a moment:

'If he can whisk me off to a fairy paradise, he must be an Adept himself, so it's no use trying to fool him. Besides, I want to know more.'

He confessed to the monk that he had seen several registers.

'Hark at you!' exclaimed the monk. 'You have seen the Registers themselves and are *still* blind! Now listen to me carefully: predestined attachments of the human heart are all of them mere illusion, they are obstacles blocking our spiritual path. Ponder deeply on what you have experienced. I shall explain it to you further when we meet again.'

With that he gave Bao-yu a hefty shove.

'Back you go!' he cried.

Bao-yu missed his footing and stumbled forward, calling out in alarm.

The family were standing by his bedside when suddenly he began to show these unmistakable signs of life. They called his name, and he opened his eyes, to find himself lying on his old kang. Before him were Lady Wang, Bao-chai and other members of his family, their eyes **red** and swollen with tears. He reflected for a moment and tried to compose himself.

'So!' he said to himself. 'I have visited the land of death, and now I have returned once more to the living!'

He lay pondering one by one the experiences of his wandering soul, and as he did so a glazed look came over his eyes. To his great delight, he found that he could still remember every detail of his dream, and he chuckled aloud with satisfaction:

'So! So!'

Lady Wang suspected a recurrence of his old fit and decided that the doctor had better be summoned again at once. She sent a maid and one of the serving-women to inform Sir Zheng that Bao-yu recovered consciousness and that his previous (and apparently fatal) crisis had only been a temporary mental affliction from which now seemed to have recovered. Since he was now obviously on mend, and was even able to utter a few words, they could safely suspend the funeral arrangements. Jia Zheng came hurrying in verify this news for himself.

'Luckless creature,' he exclaimed. 'Do you want to frighten us to death?'

He was weeping despite himself. Heaving a few gusty sighs, went out again and sent for a doctor to take Bao-yu's pulses prescribe a medicine for him.

Musk, it will be remembered, had only recently been contemplating suicide; but now that Bao-yu was recovered she set her mind at Lady Wang ordered some longan soup, and told Bao-yu to drink few mouthfuls. She was greatly relieved to see him gradually revive and regain his composure and she did not even scold Musk for original blunder, but merely told one of the maids to give the newly recovered jade to Bao-chai, who was to hang it once more round Bao-yu's neck.

'I wonder where the monk found it?' she asked out loud. 'It seem'. so strange. One minute he was demanding his money, the minute he had disappeared. Do you imagine he was some sort Immortal?'

'To judge by the "mysterious" way he came,' said Bao-chai, the equally "mysterious" way in which he left, I should say he never *found* it at all, but that it was he who took it in the first place.'

'How could he have taken it from under our very eyes?' asked Lady Wang.

'If he could bring it back, then he could take it,' persisted Bao-chai.

'When the jade was lost,' put in Aroma and Musk, 'Steward Lin consulted a word-diviner - we told you about it ma'am, soon after the wedding. The character he divined was *shang* meaning "reward". Do you remember, ma'am?'

'Yes, you're right,' said Bao-chai. 'You said it had something to do with a pawnshop. But now I can see it was really pointing to the word "monk", which is contained in the upper part

of the character *shang*. We were being told by the word-diviner that a *monk* had taken it!'

'The monk was a strange enough creature,' said Lady Wang. 'When Bao-yu was ill before, another monk came, I remember, and told us that Bao-yu had a precious object of his own at home that could cure him. He was referring to the jade. He too must have known all about its magical properties. It is extraordinary that Bao-yu came into the world with the Stone in his mouth! Have you ever heard of such a thing happening, in the whole of history? Who knows what will become of the Stone in the end? And who knows what will become of *him!* It seems to be an inseparable part of his life, in sickness and health, at his birth and ...'

She stopped short suddenly and tears started to her eyes. Bao-yu felt in his own mind that he now knew the answer to her questions only too well. Thinking back, he understood more clearly the significance of his visit to the 'other world'. But he said nothing, and stored these thoughts silently in his mind.

It was Xi-chun who spoke next:

'When the jade was lost, we asked Adamantina to consult the planchette on our behalf. The reply she received from the spirit contained the lines:

Gone to **Green**sickness Peak, to lie
At the foot of an age-old pine.

It ended with:

Follow me and laugh to see
Your journey at an end!

There's much food for thought contained in those two words "follow me". The gate of the Dharma is certainly wide and all-embracing, but somehow I doubt if Cousin Bao could squeeze through it, whoever he happened to be "following"...'

Bao-yu sniffed scornfully. Bao-chai noted this reaction of his. involuntarily she frowned and stared abstractedly into space.

'Trust you to drag the Buddha into it!' snapped You-shi. 'Are still pining for your nunnery?'

Xi-chun smiled caustically.

'Actually, sister-in-law, I have already taken the first step. I ago I vowed that meat should never touch my lips again.'

'My child!' said Lady Wang. 'In the name of Lord Buddha himself! You must abandon this foolish idea!'

Xi-chun was silent.

During this exchange Bao-yu recalled two lines from one of albums he had seen:

Alas, that daughter of so great a house
By Buddha's altar lamp should sleep alone.

He could not refrain from uttering a few sighs. Then he remembered the bunch of flowers and the mat, and glanced at Aroma started to his eyes. when the family saw him behaving in this fashion, laughing one minute and crying the next, they could think it a symptom of his old fit. None of them knew that conversation had sparked off a flash of illumination in Bao-yu's mind, with the result that he could now remember word for w~ every poem from the registers in his dream. Although he nothing, in his mind a new resolve was already formed. But anticipate.

*

After Bao-yu's sudden recovery, his spirits improved daily, and the regular administration of medicine he continued to make steady progress. Now that his son was out of danger, Jia Zheng was anxious to proceed with the interment of Lady Jia's coffin, which had being resting for a long while in the temple. He himself was still mourning and therefore free from official obligations. There was telling when (or if) Jia She would be pardoned, so Jia Zheng de to act on his own initiative and arrange for his mother's mortal remains to be transported to the South and given proper burial He sent for Jia Lian to discuss the matter.

'Your proposal is an excellent one, Uncle,' said Jia Lian. 'It would be best to proceed with this important task now. Once the mouning period is over, it may be harder for you to find the necessary time. Father is not at home, and it would be presumptuous of me to undertake a task of this nature. My one concern is the cost. You will require several thousand taels. Our stolen property must I am afraid be written off as an irretrievable loss.'

'My mind is made up to do this,' said Jia Zheng. 'In your father's absence I sent for you merely to discuss the best ways and means. You cannot go, since that would leave no one at home. I am proposing to go myself, and to take several coffins simultaneously. I will need some assistance, and am thinking of taking young Rong with me. There will be three coffins altogether, including your wife's and your cousin Lin's. It was your grandmother's wish that her grand-daughter should be buried with her in the South. As for the money, we shall simply have to borrow a few thousand taels from somewhere.'

'There is little generosity left in the world these days,' commented Jia Lian bitterly. 'You are in mourning, Uncle, and Father is in exile. I fear that it may prove impossible to borrow the money. We shall be obliged to mortgage some of our property.'

'But our residence was granted us by Imperial decree,' objected Jia Zheng. 'We are not free to dispose of it in this way.'

'That is true,' said Jia Lian. 'But we have other properties available for mortgage. They can be redeemed after your period of mourning, and after Father's return - all the more so if he is reinstated. Our chief concern is that you may overtax yourself, embarking on such a strenuous journey at your age.'

'It is a duty I owe your grandmother,' said Jia Zheng. 'While I am away, I am counting on you to be diligent here at home, and keep things firmly under control.'

'You can set your mind at ease on that score,' said Jia Lian. 'I shall do my utmost. As you will be taking several servants with you, that will mean fewer mouths to feed here, so we should be able to save a little. If you need any help along the way, you will be travelling close by the official residence of Lai Shang-rong, Steward Lai's son, so you can always call on him for assistance.'

'This affair is my responsibility,' commented Jia Zheng drily. 'Why should I need his or anyone else's assistance?'

'Of course,' Jia Lian hastily concurred, and withdrew to make his Own financial calculations.

Jia Zheng informed Lady Wang of his plans, exhorted her to keep a careful eye on the household, and selected a day in the almanac auspicious for setting out on his long journey. Then he made la preparations to leave.
Bao-yu was now completely restored to health, and Jia Huan an Jia Lan were earnestly engaged in their studies. Jia Zheng entrusted them all to Jia Lian, reminding him:

‘The state examinations will be held this year. Huan will not be able to compete because he will still be in mourning for his mother. There is nothing to prevent Lan from doing so, however, since his mourning period is shorter and will be over by then. He and Bao-yu should attend together. If they can pass the examination and become Provincial Graduates, it will help to redeem the family from its present disgrace.’

Jia Lian hastened to assure him that he would carry out these instructions. Jia Zheng then addressed the domestics at some length, took ceremonial leave at the ancestral shrine, and after a few days spent outside the city attending religious services at the temple, was finally ready to board his barge and set off. Steward Lin and handful of servants were travelling with him, and a few members of the family came some of the way to bid him farewell and see him on his way. He did not trouble any other relatives or friends.

Now that Bao-yu had been given his orders to attend the next Civil Service examinations, Lady Wang began to apply more pressure and came constantly to see how his work was progressing, while Bao-chai and Aroma added their support in the form of periodic lectures. They observed the daily improvement in his spirits, b remained quite unaware that a great inner change had been wrought within him, drawing him in an unprecedented (indeed for him almost perverse) direction. In addition to his inveterate contempt for world success and advancement, he had of late begun to adopt an attitude of indifference towards the whole gamut of romantic attachment—in a word, towards love itself. But this radically new departure w hardly noticed by those around him, and he himself said nothing enlighten them.

Nightingale was one of the few to detect the early symptoms this inner change, and she drew her own conclusions. She had j~ returned from accompanying Dai-yu’s coffin to the landing-stage and was sitting in her room brooding and weeping to herself.

‘How cold-hearted Bao-yu is! It doesn’t seem to have upset him in the slightest to see Miss Lin’s coffin taken away. He didn’t so much as shed a single tear. He could see me crying my eyes out, and didn’t even try to comfort me, but just stared at me and smiled. What a deceiver! All those fine things he used to say to us in the past were just meant to fool us. Thank goodness I’d seen through him the other evening and didn’t fall for it again! But there’s still one thing I don’t understand. He even seems to have become cold towards Aroma. I know Mrs Bao has never been a very warm 9r close person by nature - so she probably doesn’t mind his change of heart. But what about Musk and the others, don’t they feel hard done by? They’ve let their feelings make fools of them and have wasted half their lives over him, only to be forsaken like this!’

As she was brooding, she saw Fivey coming towards her.

‘You’re not still weeping for Miss Lin, are you?’ asked Fivey, seeing Nightingale’s tear-stained face. ‘If you want my opinion of Mr Bao, I think it’s high time we forgot about his reputation, and looked at what he really is. I was always being told how kind he was, especially towards girls. That’s why my mother tried so hard to get me into service with him. Since then I’ve waited on him from the beginning of this illness of his. But now that he’s better, I haven’t had so much as a kind word from him! In fact he won’t even acknowledge my existence!’

Nightingale burst out laughing at this comical tale of woe.

‘Pshh! Why, hark at you, you little vixen!’ she exclaimed. ‘How do you want Mr Bao to treat you? Really, you should be ashamed of yourself! When he’s not even interested in the maids that are closest to him, do you expect him to find time for you?’

She laughed again and drew a reproving finger across Fivey’s face.

‘What kind of a niche are you carving out for yourself in Bao-yu’s affections?’

Fivey blushed at her own foolishness. She was on the point of explaining that it wasn’t so much her own treatment at Bao-yu’s hands that was worrying her as his whole attitude towards the maids, when they heard someone calling from outside:

‘The monk is back! And he’s demanding his ten thousand taels! Her Ladyship doesn’t know what to do and wanted Mr Lian to go and talk with him, but Mr Lian’s not at home! The monk is outside, ranting and raving. Her Ladyship wants Mrs Bao to go over and consult with her.’

To learn how they placated the monk, please read the next chapter.

CHAPTER 117

Two fair damsels conspire to save the jade, and forestall
a flight from earthly bondage
An infamous rogue takes charge of the mansion, and assembles

Lady Wang sent for Bao-chai to consult with her, while Bao-yu, hearing that the monk was outside, rushed to the front courtyard on his own.

'Where is my Master?' he shouted.

Finally, as there was no sign of the monk there, he went outside, where he found his groom Li Gui barring the monk's way.

'My mother bids me invite His Reverence in,' said Bao-yu.

Li Gui relaxed his grip, and the monk went swaggering in. Bao-yu observed at once the resemblance between this monk and the guide in his dream, and the truth began to grow clearer in his mind. He bowed:

'Master, please forgive your disciple for being so slow in welcoming you.'

'I have no desire to be entertained,' said the monk. 'I just want my money, and then I'll be off.'

This was hardly the way one would have expected a man of great spiritual attainments to talk, reflected Bao-yu. But then he looked at the monk's head, which was covered with scabs, and at his filthy, tattered robe, and thought to himself:

'There's an old saying: "The True Sage does not reveal himself, and he who reveals himself is no True Sage." I must be careful not to waste this opportunity. I had better reassure him about the money, and sound him out a little.

'Father,' he said, 'please be patient. My mother is preparing your money at this very moment. Please be seated and wait a while. May I venture to enquire, Father, whether you have recently returned from the Land of Illusion?'

'Illusion, my foot!' exclaimed the monk. 'I come whence I come, and I go whither I go. I came here to return your jade. But let *me* ask *you* a question: where did your jade come from?'

For a minute or so Bao-yu could think of no reply. The monk laughed.

'If you know nothing of your own provenance, why delve into mine?'

Bao-yu had always been a sensitive and intelligent child, and his recent illumination had enabled him to penetrate to a certain extent the veil of earthly vanity and illusion. But he still knew nothing of his own personal 'history', and the monk's question hit him like a whack on the head.

'I know!' he exclaimed. 'It's not the money you're after. It's my jade. I'll give you *that* back instead.'

'And so you should!' chuckled the monk.

Without a word, Bao-yu ran into the house. He reached his apartment and, finding that Bao-chai, Aroma and the others had all gone out to wait on his mother, he quickly picked up his jade from where it lay by his bed and ran back with it. As he left the room, he collided with Aroma, giving her the fright of her life.

'Her Ladyship was just saying what a good idea it was,' she protested, 'for you to sit and keep the monk company, while she tried to work out a way of raising the money. What on earth have you come rushing in here for again?'

'I want you to go back at once,' ordered Bao-yu, 'and tell Mother she needn't bother about the money. I shall give him back the jade. That will settle the bill.'

Aroma seized Bao-yu at once:

'That's completely crazy! The jade is your very life! If he takes that away, you'll fall ill again for sure.'

'Not now,' replied Bao-yu. 'I shall never fall ill again. Now that I know my true purpose, what do I need the jade for?'

He shook Aroma off and made to leave. She hurried after him, crying:

'Come back! There's something else I want to tell you!'

Bao-yu glanced back at her:
‘There’s nothing more to be said.’
She pressed after him, casting aside her inhibitions and crying as she ran:
‘Don’t you remember the last time you lost it, how it was nearly the end of me? You’ve only just got it back, and if he takes it away again now it will cost you your life and me mine too! You’ll be sending me to my death.’
She caught up with him as she was speaking, and held him tightly. ‘Whether it means your death or not,’ said Bao-yu with strange vehemence, ‘I shall still give it back.’
He pushed Aroma away with all his might and tried to extricate himself from her grip. She, however, wound the ends of his sash around her hands and sank to the ground, sobbing and calling for help.
The maids in the inner apartments heard the noise and came running out, to find the two of them locked in this desperate inlpasse.
‘Quickly!’ cried Aroma. ‘Go and tell Her Ladyship! Master Bao wants to give his jade back to the monk!’
The maids flew to Lady Wang with this message, while Bao-yu grew angrier than ever and tried to wrench his sash from Aroma’s hands. She held on for dear life, and Nightingale came rushing out from the inner apartment as soon as she heard what Bao-yu was contemplating. Her alarm and concern seemed if anything greater than Aroma’s, and her previous resolution to be indifferent towards Bao-yu seemed to have vanished without trace. She joined forces with Aroma, and Bao-yu, though a man against women, and though he flailed and struggled for all he was worth, could do nothing in the face of their desperate refusal to let go. Unable to set himself free, he could only sigh and say:
‘Will you fight like this to preserve a piece of jade? What would you do if *I* left you?’
These words produced a noisy outburst of sobbing from Aroma and Nightingale.
Things had reached this impasse when Lady Wang and Bao-chai hurried onto the scene. Now Lady Wang could verify the truth of the report with her own eyes.
‘Bao-yu!’ she cried, her voice choking with sobs. ‘Have you taken leave of your senses again?’
Bao-yu knew that with the arrival of his mother he no longer stood any chance of escape - and therefore changed his tactics.
‘There was really no need for you to alarm yourself so, Mother,’ he said, with a placatory smile. ‘They always make such a fuss about nothing. I thought the monk was being most unreasonable, insisting on being paid every penny of ten thousand taels. It made me very cross and I came in here with the idea of handing him back the jade and at the same time pretending that it was a fake and worthless to us anyway. If I could convince him that it was of no real value to us, then he would probably accept whatever reward we offered him.’
‘Goodness! I thought you were in earnest!’ exclaimed Lady Wang. ‘I must Say, you might have told them the truth--look at the state they’re all in!’
‘It may seem a good idea to do as Bao-yu suggests,’ said Bao-chai. ‘But I still think it would be risky even to go through the motions of giving it back. If you ask me, there’s something most peculiar about that monk. He could very easily do something terrible and throw the whole family into confusion all over again. We can always sell my jewellery if we need to raise the money.’
‘Yes,’ said Lady Wang. ‘Let’s try that first.’
Bao-yu made no comment. Bao-chai came up to him and took the jade from his hand.
‘There is no need for you to go,’ she said. ‘Mother and I can give him the money.’
‘Very well then, I won’t give him the jade,’ said Bao-yu. ‘But I must at least see him this once.’
Aroma and Nightingale were still loath to allow him out of their sight. In the end it was Bao-chai who ordered them to set him free:
‘He’d better go if he wants to.’
Reluctantly Aroma complied.

‘You all of you seem to value the jade more highly than its owner!’ said Bao-yu with a wry smile. ‘What if I go away with the monk and leave you with the jade? You’ll look rather silly then, won’t you?’

This revived Aroma’s anxiety, and she would have seized hold of him again had she not felt constrained by the presence of Lady Wang and Bao-chai and by the need to preserve some semblance of respect towards Bao-yu. It was too late anyway, for the moment they loosened their grip Bao-yu was gone. Aroma contented herself with despatching a junior maid to the inner gate with instructions for Tealeaf and Bao-yu’s other page-boys to keep an eye on him, as he was ‘acting rather strangely’. The maid went at once to do her bidding.

Lady Wang and Bao-chai meanwhile walked in to Bao-yu’s apartment and sat down. They asked Aroma exactly what had happened and she gave them a full account of all that Bao-yu had said. They were both extremely perturbed and sent another messenger with instructions that the servants were to watch Bao-yu and do their utmost to hear what the monk said. A short while later, a junior maid returned to report to Lady Wang:

‘Master Bao is acting very strangely, madam. The pages outside say that since you would not give him the jade, he now feels obliged to offer *himself* in its place.’

‘Gracious!’ exclaimed Lady Wang. ‘And whatever did the monk say to that?’

‘He said he wanted the jade, not the man,’ replied the maid.

‘Not the money?’ asked Bao-chai.

‘They didn’t even mention that. Afterwards the monk and Master Bao started talking and laughing together. There was a lot said that the pages couldn’t follow.’

‘The little idiots!’ complained Lady Wang. ‘Even if they couldn’t understand it themselves, they could at least repeat it to us. Go and tell them to come here.’

The maid sped to do Lady Wang’s bidding. Presently Tealeaf arrived, stood outside in the covered walk and paid his respects through the intervening window.

‘Surely,’ said Lady Wang, ‘if you couldn’t understand the meaning of what Master Bao and the monk were saying, you could at least manage to repeat the words to us.’

‘All we caught, ma’am,’ answered Tealeaf, ‘was something about a Great Fable Mountain and a **Green**sickness Peak. And then something about a Land of Illusion and “severing earthly ties”.’

To Lady Wang this made as little sense as it had to the pages; but it seemed to have a startling effect on Bao-chai, who stared dumbfounded in front of her.

They were about to send someone to bring Bao-yu back, when in he came himself, wreathed in smiles, announcing:

‘All is well! All is well!’

Bao-chai stared at him in dismay, while Lady Wang asked:

‘What have you been raving to that monk about now?’

‘It was anything but raving. It was a very serious conversation. It turns out that he knows me, and that all he really wanted was to see me. He never wanted the money. At the most he was hoping for a friendly contribution, which would create good karma. As soon as we had reached an understanding, he got up and went. Just like that. So I think you’ll agree, all *is* well!’

Lady Wang could not believe this, and asked Tealeaf, who was still standing on the other side of the window, to verify Bao-yu’s story. He hurried out to question the gateman, and returned presently to report:

‘It is true. The monk really has left. As he was going he said: “Their Ladyships are not to worry themselves. I never wanted the money.” He says he only wants Master Bao-yu to call on him whenever he can. “Let all be fulfilled in accordance with karma; a fixed purpose resides in all things.” Those were his parting words.’

‘So he was a holy man after all!’ exclaimed Lady Wang. ‘Did anyone ask him where he lived?’

‘According to the gateman, the monk said that Master Bao would know where to find him.’

Lady Wang turned to Bao-yu:

‘Well - where *does* he live?’

Bao-yu smiled enigmatically:

'His abode is, well . . . far away and yet at the same time close at hand. It all depends how you look at it.'

'For goodness' sake!' interrupted Bao-chai impatiently, before he had finished speaking. 'Pull yourself together and stop all this nonsense! You know how Mother and Father love you! And Father has told you how important it is for you to succeed in life!'

'Does what I am talking about not count as success?' asked Bao-yu in a droll tone. 'Haven't you heard the saying: "When one son becomes a monk, the souls of seven generations of ancestors go to Heaven"?'

When she heard this Lady Wang was more distressed than ever:

'Our family is doomed! Xi-chun talks of nothing but her nunnery, and now here's another! Why should I bother to drag my life out any longer!'

She began sobbing hysterically. Bao-chai tried to comfort her, but Bao-yu only laughed and said:

'I was joking! There was no need to take it so seriously, Mother.'

Lady Wang ceased her tears:

'How can you joke about such a thing?'

At this juncture a maid came in to report the return of Jia Lian:

'He looks very upset too, ma'am. He would like you to go over and have a word with him.'

This was another shock for Lady Wang.

'Ask him just this once if he can come here. Mrs Bao is his cousin, so he needn't worry about her being here too.'

Jia Lian duly came in and paid his respects to Lady Wang. Bao-chai also greeted him.

'I have just received a letter from Father,' said Jia Lian, 'saying that he has fallen seriously ill. I must go to him at once, or it may be too late!'

Tears were streaming down his cheeks.

'Did the letter say what kind of illness?' asked Lady Wang.

'It began as a cold but has developed into pneumonia, which has now reached a critical stage. A special messenger travelled by day and night to bring us the news, and says that if I delay my departure for even a day or two it may be too late. I must leave as soon as possible. I am concerned that with Uncle away in the South there will be no one left to take charge of things here. You will have to make do with young Qiang and Yun; whatever their shortcomings, at least they are men and can communicate with you about anything that may crop up outside. There's nothing much to worry about in my apartment. Autumn spends her time crying and complaining and says she wants to leave, so I have told her family to come and take her away. That will make life a little more bearable for Patience at any rate. There is no one to look after Qiao-jie, I know, but Patience is not too bad with her. Qiao-jie is quite a sensible girl, but has an even more difficult temperament than her mother, so I hope you will try to offer her guidance whenever you can, Aunt.'

As he spoke, a telltale **red** came into his eyes and he extracted a little silk handkerchief from the betel-nut bag at his waist and dabbed them with it.

'With her own grandmother so close at hand, what need is there for you to entrust her to me?' asked Lady Wang.

'If you adopt that attitude, I might as well beat myself to death!' said Jia Lian to his aunt in a somewhat histrionic *sotto voce*. 'I won't say any more, just beg you to be kind to me and do what you can.'

He knelt at her feet.

'Get up at once!' exclaimed Lady Wang. Her eyes too were moist with tears. 'What way is this for aunt and nephew to talk to one another? There is one thing we should discuss. The child is of age now. If anything untoward should happen to your father and you should be delayed, and if in the meantime a suitable family should make a proposal of marriage, do you wish me to wait for your return, or shall I let her grandmother decide in your absence?'

‘Of course you need not wait for me. As you and Mother will be here, the two of you should do whatever you think best.’

‘You had better go now,’ said Lady Wang. ‘Write your Uncle Zheng a note. Tell him that your father is in a precarious state of health, and that there are no menfolk left at home. Ask him to complete your grandmother’s burial rites and come home as quickly as possible.’

‘Very well, Aunt.’

As he was on the point of leaving, Jia Lian turned back once more and said:

‘There should be enough servants in the house. But there is no one in the Garden. The place is altogether too deserted, especially now that Bao Yong has gone back with the Zhens and Cousin Ke and Aunt Xue have moved out of their old compound next to the Garden to live in an apartment of their own. All the buildings in the Garden are empty and have been neglected. You should send someone round regularly to inspect the place. **Green** Bower Hermitage is a family foundation, and now that Adamantina has disappeared something must be done about her various attendants. The Sister Superior does not feel she can make the decision herself, and would like someone in the family to take charge.’

‘That will have to wait,’ replied Lady Wang. ‘With our own affairs in such disarray, we are in no position to start taking on extra responsibilities. You must on no account mention this to Xi-chun. It would only encourage her in her own ideas. Oh dear, what are we coming to? A nun in the family would be the last straw!’

‘That is something I would not have brought up myself,’ said Jia Lian. ‘But since you have done so, I should perhaps offer my advice, for what it’s worth. Xi-chun belongs after all to the Ning-guo side of the family. Neither of her parents is alive, her elder brother has been sent into exile, and she and her sister-in-law are on bad terms with one another. I hear that she has threatened suicide quite a few times. If her heart is really set on being a nun and we continue to be so inflexible, she may really take her own life. And then we would lose her altogether!’

Lady Wang nodded:

‘It is too heavy a burden to lay on my shoulders! This really isn’t my responsibility. I must leave it to her sister-in-law to decide.’

Jia Lian said a few more words and took his leave. He summoned the servants and gave them their instructions. Then he wrote a letter to Jia Zheng, and packed his bags. Patience urged him at some length to take good care of himself, while Qiao-jie seemed exceedingly upset by her father’s departure. Jia Lian expressed his wish to entrust her to the care of her uncle Wang Ren, but she wouldn’t consider it; and when she learned that Jia Yun and Jia Qiang were to be on outside duty she also felt extremely uneasy, though she said nothing. She bade her father farewell, and resolved to lead a quiet life at home with Patience.

Felicity and **Crimson** had been frequently absent since Xi-feng’s death, on some Occasions asking for leave, on others pleading sickness. Patience had contemplated asking a young lady from some other branch of the Jia family to come and stay with them, partly to keep Qiao-jie company, partly to help educate her, but the only names that occurred to her were those of Xi4uan and Si-jie, Grandmother Jia’s favourites, and of these two Xi-luan had recently married while Si-jie was engaged and due to leave home any day.

Jia Yun and Jia Qiang saw Jia Lian off and then went in to report to Ladies Xing and Wang. The two men took turns on night-duty in the outer study, and during the daytime enjoyed themselves with the servants, throwing parties and inviting a variety of friends, who took it in turns with them to act as host. There was even some serious gambling. The ladies of course had no inkling of this.

One day Lady Xing’s brother Xing De-quan and Wang Ren dropped by. Learning that Yun and Qiang were now established at Rong-guo House, and observing the good times that were being had, they began to call quite frequently, to ‘see how things were getting on’, and had soon formed a regular drinking and gambling foursome in the outer study. All the decent servants had accompanied either Jia Zheng or Jia Lian, and the only menservants left behind were the various sons and nephews of stewards Lai and Lin, who were used to the

easy life their parents' good fortune had brought them, and were quite ignorant of the principles according to which a proper household should be run. With their parents away, they were like colts let loose in the meadow. And with the two degenerate young masters to spur them on, their pleasures knew no bounds. Under this new regime, the family motto might as well have been: Anything Goes.

Jia Qiang thought of inviting Bao-yu to join them, but Jia Yun soon squashed that idea:

'That fellow is an absolute killjoy. It would only be asking for trouble. A year or two ago I had a perfect marriage lined up for him. The girl's father was a tax-collector in one of the provinces, the family owned several pawnshops, and the girl herself was an absolute peach. I went to a lot of trouble and wrote him a long letter about it, but I might as well have saved myself the bother. He's an utter spoilsport.

Yun glanced round to make sure there was no one else listening and continued:

'The truth was, he already fancied this new missis of his! And then there was Miss Lin, you must have heard about *that*. She died of a broken heart, it's common knowledge. And it was all his fault. But that's another story. To each his fate in love, I suppose. All the same, I don't see why he had to get so angry with me, and start cutting me dead. Perhaps he thought I was trying to get into his good books or something.'

Jia Qiang nodded and gave up the idea of inviting Bao-yu. What neither of them knew was that, ever since his meeting with the monk, Bao-yu was finally resolved to sever his ties with the world. In his mother's presence he still tried to behave as normally as possible, but there was already a marked cooling-off in his relations with Bao-chai and Aroma. The maids were unaware of this change and continued to tease him as before, only to find themselves totally ignored. He was completely oblivious of practical household affairs; and as for his studies, whenever his mother and Bao-chai chivvied him on, he would feign diligence, but in reality his mind was filled with thoughts of the monk and his mysterious excursion to the fairy domain. Everyone around him now seemed unbearably mundane, and he began to find his own family environment less and less congenial. When he was free of other commitments, it was Xi-chun that he chose as a companion. The two of them found they had more and more in common, and their lively conversations further strengthened his own resolution. He had little time now for Jia Huan and Jia Lan.

Jia Huan, now that his father was away from home and his mother Aunt Zhao dead, and since Lady Wang paid little attention to what he did, began to gravitate towards Jia Yun and his cronies. Suncloud, who constantly tried to dissuade him from this course, received nothing but abuse for her pains. Silver observed to herself that Bao-yu was becoming more deranged than ever, and asked her mother if she could be taken out of service. Bao-yu and Jia Huan in their different ways succeeded in alienating the people around them. Jia Lan, by contrast, sat by his mother's side conscientiously studying, and when he had finished a composition would take it to the family school for the Preceptor's comments. Recently the Preceptor had been bedridden a great deal of the time, and consequently Jia Lan had been obliged to work on his own. His mother had always been fond of peace and quiet, and apart from calling on Lady Wang and Bao-chai she did not get about much but sat at home and watched Jia Lan at his work. So although life continued in Rong-guo House, everyone was very much minding his own business, which left Jia Huan, Jia Qiang and company free to indulge themselves unmolested. They were soon pawning or selling all manner of family property in order to subsidize their disgraceful activities. Jia Huan was the worst. His whoring and gambling knew no bounds.

One day Xing De-quan and Wang Ren had called and were in the outer study drinking. They were in high spirits and decided to send for some singsong girls to entertain them with a song or two and join in their carousing.

'This is turning into a downright orgy!' protested Jia Qiang playfully. 'I suggest we have a drinking game to raise the tone a little.'

Everyone agreed that this was a good idea.

'Let's play Pass the Goblet, on the word "moon",' proposed Jia Qiang. 'I shall say a line and count it out, and whoever gets the word moon" has to drink and then recite two lines - a

Head and a Tail -according to my instructions. The forfeit is three big cups.'

Everyone agreed to his rules. First Jia Qiang drank a cup as MC, and then he recited Li Bo's line:

'"The Peacock Goblets fly, the drunken moon..."' The 'moon' fell on Jia Huan.

'For the Head, give me a line with Cassia,' said Jia Qiang.

Jia Huan came up with a line by the Tang poet Wang Jian: "'A cold dew silently soaks the Cassia flowers ...'

'And Fragrance for the Tail,' concluded Jia Qiang.

Jia Huan obliged with a line by another Tang poet, Song Zhi-wen:

'"Beyond the clouds there wafts a heavenly Fragrance ..."'

'Boring! Boring!' complained Xing De-quan. 'Stop posing, Huan, me old fellow! Fat lot *you* know about poetry! This is no fun at all, it's enough to make you sick! Let's drop it and play Guess-fingers instead. Loser to drink *and* sing a song, a double sconce. Anyone who can't sing can tell a joke instead. But it better be a good one.'

They all agreed to this new proposal and there was a noisy scene as they began to throw out fingers and make their calls. Wang Ren was the first loser. He drank and sang a song.

'Bravo!' they cried and set to again. Next to lose was one of the girls. She sang a song called 'Little Miss Glamorous'. Then it was Xing De-quan. Everyone wanted a song from him, but he protested that he was tone-deaf:

'I'll tell a joke instead.'

'If nobody laughs,' Jia Qiang warned him, 'you'll have to pay another forfeit.'

Xing downed his cup and began his story:

'Ladies and gentlemen: once upon a time, in a certain village, there were two temples - a big one, dedicated to the Great Lord of the North, and by its side a smaller one, dedicated to the Village God. The Great Lord was always inviting the Village God over for a chat. One day something was stolen from his temple, and he asked the Village God to look into the matter. "But there are no thieves in this district," protested the lesser deity. "It must be carelessness on the part of one of your door-gods. Someone must have sneaked in past them and stolen these things." "Nonsense!" replied the Great Lord. "You're in charge round these parts. If there's been a theft, then you're responsible. What's the meaning of this? You should be trying to catch the thief, not accusing my door-gods of being careless!" "What I meant by careless," prevaricated the Village God, "was that your temple must have been badly sited - you know, the Dragon Lines must be at fault…" "I had no idea you could read *fengshui,*" commented the Great Lord in a tone of disbelief. "Allow me to take a look for you," offered the Village God, "and see what I can see." He walked around the temple, peering into every nook and cranny, and after a while reported: "My Lord, behind your throne there is a double-leaved **red** door. An unfortunate oversight. Personally I have a good solid brick wall behind my throne, so naturally I never have things stolen. You can easily remedy the present situation by having a wall built in place of the door." This seemed plausible to the Great Lord, and he instructed his door-gods to call in builders and put up a wall. "But we can't even afford a single candle or stick of incense in this temple!" moaned the door-gods. "How can we possibly buy bricks and mortar and hire the labour to build a wall?" The Great Lord could think of no solution. He ordered them to find one, but they were stumped too. Just then the Tortoise General, whose recumbent stone form lay at the Great Lord's feet, stood up and said: "You're a useless lot! I've got an idea: pull down the **red** door, and use my belly to block up the doorway. I'm sure that will do the job perfectly well." "An excellent plan!" cried the

door-gods in chorus. “Convenient, dependable and free!” So the Tortoise General became Rear Wall, and peace prevailed - for a while. Then things began to disappear from the temple again. The door-gods summoned the Village God and complained: “You guaranteed our security if we built a wall, but look what’s happened! We’ve got a wall and *still* we re losing things!” “Your wall can’t be solid enough.” “Have a look at it for yourself,” they insisted. The Village God went and did so. It certainly seemed a solid enough wall. All most puzzling. Then he felt it with his hand. “Aaah!” he exclaimed. “No wonder! I meant a properly built wall. Any old thief could push down this false wall *(jia qiang).”‘*

They all laughed, even Jia Qiang, whose name had provided the raw material for the joke.

‘Come on, Dumbo!’ he protested. ‘Be fair! I never called *you* names! Drink a forfeit, there’s a boy!’

Dumbo, who was already a sheet or so in the wind, willingly complied. They all had a few more cups, and in the general state of intoxication Dumbo let fly a few barbed remarks about *his* sister (Lady Xing), while Wang Ren had a go at desecrating the memory of *his* (Xi-feng), both of them evincing great bitterness. Their example and the wine lent Jia Huan a little courage, and he too had his fling, complaining how heartless Xi-feng had been, and how she had tried to ruin so many of their lives.

‘Yes, people ought to show a bit of common decency,’ they all agreed. ‘The way she used Lady Jia’s influence to bully everyone was dreadful. Well, she died without giving birth to an heir; she only ever had a daughter. Retribution in her own lifetime!’

Jia Yun, who remembered only too well how harsh Xi-feng had once been towards him, and how Qiao-jie had started bawling the instant she set eyes on him, allowed himself to wade into the general melee with some abuse of his own about the two of them. Jia Qiang tried to steer the party in a less vindictive direction:

‘Come on! Drink up! This gossip will get us nowhere!’

‘How old is the young lady you mentioned?’ enquired the two Singsong girls. ‘Is she pretty?’

‘Oh yes,’ replied Jia Qiang. ‘Extremely so. She’s about thirteen.’

‘What a pity, in that case, that she was born into a family like yours!’ the girls exclaimed. ‘If 9nly she came from a more humble home, she could soon find herself in a position to bring all her family lots of jobs, and pots of money into the bargain!’

‘What do you mean?’

‘We know of a certain Mongol prince,’ replied the girls. ‘Quite a ladies’ man he is. He is looking for a concubine, and the lady who fits the bill would be able to take her whole family along with her to live in the palace. What a marvellous stroke of luck that would be for somebody!’

None of them seemed to take much notice of this, except for Wang Ren, who looked very thoughtful. For the present he said nothing and continued drinking.

A little later two young lads came in, younger sons of Stewards Lai and Lin.

‘You seem to be having a fine time of it, sirs, by the looks of things!’ they exclaimed.

Everyone rose to greet them.

‘Why have the two of you been such a long time? We’ve been expecting you for ages.’

They explained:

‘Early this morning we heard rather a disturbing rumour that out family was in some sort of official trouble again, so we hurried out to see what news we could glean at the Palace. It

turned out to have nothing to do with our family after all.'

'In that case, why didn't you come straight here afterwards?'

'It wasn't *exactly* our family, but it was connected with us. It was that Mr Jia Yu-cun. When we were at the Palace we saw him bound in chains. They told us he was being taken to the High Court for questioning. We knew he was a frequent visitor here, and were afraid that the case might somehow involve us, so we followed them to see what happened.'

'Good thinking, my man!' exclaimed Jia Yun. 'We are most obliged to you. Sit down and have a drink, and then tell us all about it.'

The two sat down after a polite show of reluctance, and as they drank continued:

'This Mr Yu-cun is certainly an able enough fellow, and knows how to pull strings. He'd done extremely well until recently, in fact; but greed was his downfall. There were several charges brought against him, "avarice" and "extortion" being two of them. As we all know, our present August Sovereign is exceptionally wise, compassionate and benevolent. There is one thing that stirs his wrath, however, and that is corruption, any form of tyrannical or bullying behaviour. So His Majesty decreed that the offender in this case should be arrested and brought to trial. If he is found guilty, things will look pretty grim for him; if he is acquitted, then the men who brought the charges will be in for trouble. It is certainly comforting to think what just times we live in! For those lucky enough to be officials in the first place!'

'Like your elder brother,' said one of the company, referring to Steward Lai's eldest son, Lai Shang-rong. 'He's a county magistrate. Done very nicely for himself.'

'True enough,' replied young Lal. 'But his conduct still leaves a lot to be desired, I'm afraid. He may not last long at this rate.'

'Has he been taking squeeze himself?'

Lai nodded and drained his cup.

'What other news did you pick up at the Palace?' they asked them.

'Oh, nothing much. A number of criminals from the coast have apparently been arrested, and sent to the High Court. During their trial they revealed the whereabouts of several others of their kind, lying low here in the capital, watching and waiting for fresh opportunities for crime. Fortunately the present civil and military authorities have such a sound grip on the situation, and are so dedicated to the service of the throne, that these criminal elements will be effectively controlled.'

'If you've heard of such cases, perhaps you have news of *our* burglary?' asked one of the party.

'I'm afraid not,' came the reply. 'I heard something about a man from one of the inland provinces who got into trouble here in town for abducting a girl and running off with her to the coast. She put up a fight and he ended by killing her. They arrested him crossing the border, and executed him on the spot.'

'Wasn't Sister Adamantina from **Green** Bower Hermitage abducted in similar circumstances?' put in one of the others. 'Couldn't it have been her?'

'Bound to have been!' muttered Jia Huan.

'How could you know?' they asked him.

'She was a sickening creature!' said Jia Huan. 'Always giving herself airs and graces. She had only to set eyes on Bao-yu to get a big smile all over her face. But she wouldn't so much as acknowledge *my* existence! I hope it is her!'

'Plenty of people are kidnapped all the time,' someone commented. 'It could easily have

been someone else.'

'I can well believe it was her,' said Jia Yun. 'The day before yesterday I heard that one of the sisters at the Hermitage had a dream in which she saw Adamantina being killed.'

This was greeted with derision:

'You can't take dreams seriously!'

'Dream or no dream, it's all one to me,' protested Dumbo. 'Let's get on with the real business of the evening, shall we? Eat up, everyone, and we can start tonight's Big Game.'

This met with general approval, and as soon as they had finished their meal they began gambling in earnest. They were still at it well after midnight, when suddenly they heard a great commotion coming from the inner apartments. They were eventually informed that Xi-chun had been arguing with You-shi, and the upshot of it was that she had cut all her hair off and gone running to Ladies Xing and Wang. There she kowtowed and begged them to relent and let her have her wish. If they would not, she threatened to put an end to her life there and then. The two ladies were at their wits' end, and sent for Jia Qiang and Jia Yun to intervene. Jia Yun however knew that this was something Xi-chun had resolved to do long ago, at least since the fateful night of the burglary when she had been left in charge of the house, and to him there seemed little hope in trying to dissuade her now. He talked it over with Jia Qiang:

'Lady Wang says she wants us to intervene, but I don't see how we can achieve anything. It's a heavy responsibility, and they want to off-load it onto us. We'll have to put on a show of talking Xi-chun out of her decision, and then, when she refuses to listen, we'll have to pass the matter back to the ladies, and meanwhile write a letter to Uncle Lian, absolving ourselves from any blame.'

They both agreed on this strategy, called on Ladies Xing and Wang, and then went through the motions of trying to dissuade Xi-chun, who was every bit as adamant as they had predicted. If she could not take refuge in a convent outside the family mansion, then she said she would make do with a couple of quiet rooms within it, in which to recite her sutras and say her prayers. Eventually You-shi could see that the aunts were not prepared to take the responsibility; her own feat that Xi-chun might commit suicide got the better of her and she forced herself to compromise.

'I can see I shall have to take the blame. Very well then. Let them say that it was I who could not tolerate my own husband's sister and drove her to a nunnery! What do I care! But I cannot allow her to leave home. That is out of the question. She will have to stay here. Aunts Xing and Wang, I call you to witness my decision. Qiang, you had better write a letter informing my husband and Cousin Lian of what has happened.'

Jia Qiang acquiesced in You-shi's decision. But to know whether Lady Xing and Lady Wang did likewise, you will have to turn to the next chapter.

CHAPTER 118

Provoked by a rankling antipathy, Uncle and Cousin
plot the ruin of an innocent maid
A/armed by riddling utterances, Wife and Concubine
remonstrate with their idiot master

Lady Xing and Lady Wang judged from You-shi's words that the situation was irretrievable.

'If our niece wishes to become a nun,' said Lady Wang, in a tone of resignation, 'then it must have been decreed in some earlier life. This is evidently her karma, and there is nothing we can do to prevent it. But none the less, it would look very bad for a girl from a family such as ours to enter a nunnery. That really is unthinkable.'

She turned to Xi-chim:

'Your sister-in4aw has given you her permission, and we can only lend our approval to hers. But I must ask you not to shave your head. What matters is your state of mind, not your hair-style. After all, Adamantina never shaved hers. Talking of which, I simply cannot understand that dreadful business! How could she have succumbed to temptation so easily? Anyway, if your mind is really and truly made up, then we shall simply have to consider your present apartment your hermitage. Your maids and servants had better be sent for, and we can give them a choice. Those who wish to stay on with you can do so, and we'll find husbands for the others.'

Xi-chun stopped crying at last, and bowed gratefully to Ladies Xing and Wang, Li Wan, You-shi and the others present.

Lady Wang now addressed Landscape and Xi-chun's other maids:

'Which of you wishes to enter the religious life with your mistress?'

'We will do whatever you command, ma'am,' was their response. Lady Wang could tell that they were none of them genuinely willing and tried to think who else would be suitable to wait on Xi-chun in her new life. Aroma was standing behind Bao-yu, fully expecting this decision of Xi-chun's to move him to tears and provoke one of his fits, but to her surprise and considerable distress, he merely sighed with admiration and exclaimed:

'What a rare resolve!'

Bao-chai made no comment. But she was constantly on the lookout for telltale signs to help her gauge her husband's innermost feelings and intentions, and could not help but weep at this further evidence (so she thought) of his deluded mind.

Lady Wang was about to summon all the other maids and question them, when Nightingale suddenly came forward and fell to her knees:

'Have you decided yet, ma'am, who would be most suitable to wait on Miss Xi-chun?'

'I have no intention of forcing anyone,' replied Lady Wang. 'Whoever is willing must speak up.'

'Miss Xi-chun has chosen a religious life,' said Nightingale. 'But none of her maids, or so it seems, shares this aspiration of hers. I have something I should like to say, ma'am. It's not that I wish Miss Xi-chun to be parted from her maids. But aspirations differ. I served Miss Lin for a long time, and as you know, ma'am, she treated me with a kindness that I shall never be able to repay. When she died, my one wish was to follow her to the grave; but because she was not a member of this family, and because I also owe so much to all of you, it was hard for me to take that step. Now that Miss Xi-chun wishes to become a nun, I beg Your Ladyships to let me go with her and devote the rest of my days to serving her. If Your Ladyships will only grant me this wish, my life will not have been in vain!'

When Nightingale had finished speaking, and before either Lady Xing or Lady Wang could reply, Bao-yu, who at the initial mention of Dai-yu's name had begun to show ominous signs of being distressed and tearful, suddenly gave a loud laugh and came forward:

'I have no business saying this, I know, but since you were so good as to send Nightingale to work in my apartment, Mother, I hope you will forgive me for speaking my mind. Please grant her this request, and allow her to carry out this fine resolution of hers.'

'If it were any of your other cousins leaving home to get married,' replied Lady Wang, 'you would be crying

your heart out. But now, when Xi-chun says she wants to leave home and become a nun, so far from trying to dissuade her, you actually praise her for it. I'm afraid I completely fail to understand what's going on in your mind.'

'First let me know whether this matter is settled,' said Bao-yu. 'Has Xi-chun definitely made up her mind? And has she definitely received your permission? If so, if it is real, then there is something further I should like to tell you, Mother. But if it is still not settled, I shall keep what I know to myself.'

'What a peculiar way to talk!' exclaimed Xi-chun. 'If I were not in earnest, do you honestly think I would have been able to convince my aunts? I feel the same way as Nightingale: if they will let me do as I wish, I shall count myself blessed; if they will not, I should rather die than continue living my present life! So, there's nothing to fear. Whatever you have to say, just go ahead and say it.'

'If I do tell you this, it's hardly divulging a secret,' said Bao-yu, 'since it refers to something already predestined. I want you all to listen while I recite a poem.'

'Honestly!' they chided him. 'At a moment like this, with real people really suffering, all you can think about is poetry! It's sickening!'

'It's not something of my own. It's a poem I once saw somewhere. I'd like you to listen to it.'

'Oh very well. Hurry up then. Enough of your prattling!'

Bao-yu did not try to explain himself any further, hut began to recite:

> 'When you see through the spring scene's transient state, A nun's black habit shall replace your own.
> Alas, that daughter of so great a house
> By Buddha's altar lamp should sleep alone!'

Li Wan and Bao-chai both cried out in alarm:

'Lord save us! He's bewitched!'

Lady Wang shook her head and sighed:

'Bao-yu, where on earth did you see this poem?'

Bao-yu was reluctant to say any more, and replied:

'Please don't ask, Mother. Just take my word for it.

As the meaning of the poem gradually sank in, Lady Wang began sobbing again:

'You said you were joking the other day, when you talked of becoming a monk yourself. And now this poem all of a sudden! Enough! I understand. What am I to do? There is nothing I *can* do, but let you go your own ways. If only you could have waited till I was dead and gone! Then you could all have done as you pleased!'

Bao-chai tried to console her, but was in no fit state to do so. The pain she herself felt was like a knife-wound piercing her heart, and eventually she broke down and burst into tears. Aroma was faint with weeping and had to be supported by Ripple. Bao-yu did not shed a single tear, nor did he try to offer them any solace. He maintained a total silence. Jia Lan and Jia Huan had already left, and it fell to Li Wan to do what she could to save the situation:

'I'm sure it 5 simply that Bao-yu is too upset by this decision of Xi-chun's to know what he is saying. We should not take it seriously. Nightingale must receive an answer, though; we must let her stand up. Is she to be granted her request or not?'

'What difference does it make?' replied Lady Wang. 'Her mind is clearly made up in any case, and when a person's mind is made up there's no stopping them. No doubt Bao-yu will tell us that this decision of Nightingale's is predestined too.'

Nightingale kowtowed, and Xi-chun thanked Lady Wang. Nightingale also kowtowed to Bao-yu and Bao-chai.

'Amida Buddha!' exclaimed Bao-yu piously. 'How noble! How rare! I never thought that you would be the

first of us to be saved!'
Bao-chai's self-control failed her again, and Aroma, heedless of Lady Wang's presence, burst out sobbing and cried:
'I want to go with Miss Xi-chun too, and spend the rest of my life in prayer!'
Bao-yu smiled:
'Yours is also a fine aspiration. But alas, a life of seclusion has not been decreed you by fate.'
'Then I would rather die!' sobbed Aroma.
Despite his new-found detachment, Bao-yu could not help being moved by this declaration. But he said nothing.
It was already three o'clock in the morning, and he suggested to his mother that she should retire for the night. Li Wan went back to her apartment, and Landscape escorted Xi-chun to her room, where she continued to wait on her for the time being. Husbands were eventually found for each of Xi-chun's maids, and Nightingale spent the rest of her days faithfully serving her. But we anticipate.

*

J ia Zheng, meanwhile, was on his way south with Grandmother Jia's coffin, and had run into an army convoy returning to the capital after the victorious completion of a campaign. The canal was hopelessly congested with military transport boats, and the delay made Jia Zheng extremely fretful. His one consolation was an encounter with an official from the Coastal Defence Yamen, who informed him that the Commandant, Tan-chun's father-in-law, had been recalled to the capital. Tan-chun would now be able to visit home, although there was no indication when she would be travelling.
Another consequence of the delay was that Jia Zheng found himself running short of cash. He was obliged to write a letter and have it delivered to the yamen of Steward Lai's son, Lai Shang-rong, who happened to be a mandarin in the vicinity, asking him for a loan of five hundred silver taels. The servant entrusted with this mission was told to bring the money and overtake Jia Zheng further along the canal.
A few days and a dozen or so *Ii* later, the servant reappeared and came on board the boat with Lai Shang-rong's reply. The letter was full of tales of woe of one sort or another, and enclosed fifty taels of silver. Jia Zhen was furious, and without a moment's hesitation ordered the servant to return:
'Take him back his money this instant! And he can have his letter too! Tell him not to bother!'
The poor servant did as he was ordered and returned to Lai's yamen. Lai, perturbed at having both his letter and his paltry offering returned, and knowing that he had behaved meanly, made up another package, this time enclosing an additional hundred taels, and begged the servant to take it back with him to Jia Zheng. But despite Lai's pleas and blandishments, the man absolutely refused, and returned to the boat empty-handed.
Lai Shang-rong was most apprehensive about the consequences of this episode, and immediately wrote to his father at Rong-guo House, advising him to take some leave and if possible to buy his way out of service. When Steward Lai received his son's letter, he asked Jia Qiang and Jia Yun to plead with Lady Wang for his release. Jia Qiang knew quite well that it would be futile even to try; he let a day go by and then gave a false report that Lady Wang had refused his request. So Lai took a few days' leave, and meanwhile sent a messenger to his son's yamen, advising him also to plead sick and relinquish his official post. Lady Wang knew nothing whatsoever about all these goings-on.

*

Jia Yun was most disappointed to hear Jia Qiang turn down Lai's request. It (or, rather, the commission it might have brought) had seemed his last chance of recouping the enormous gambling losses he had incurred over the past several days. His only other hope was to apply to Jia Huan for a loan. But Jia Huan was in no

position to act as his creditor, having himself never had a penny of his own, and having already squandered his mother's savings. If Yun failed to raise a loan, he did however succeed in stirring Jia Huan to fresh thoughts of revenge. Memories of Xi-feng's cruelty still rankled in Jia Huan's mind; and with Jia Lian away, he was more than ready to vent some of his spleen on Qiao-jie. The loan-seeking Jia Yun seemed an ideal accomplice.

'You're not a boy any longer, Yun!' he grumbled provocatively. 'Why come asking for a loan from a pauper like me when there's a chance of making a nice little profit?'

'Tell us another!' replied Yun. 'We've just been having a bit of a lark. I never saw any chances for profit passing us by.'

'What was that a day or two ago about a Mongol prince wanting to buy himself a concubine? Why not talk it over with Dumbo, and offer the prince Qiao-jie?'

'This may make you cross when I say it, Uncle Huan,' replied Jia Yun. 'But I'd better say it all the same. Supposing the prince *did* buy a concubine from our family, he'd probably never want anything more to do with us afterwards.'

In response to this, Jia Huan whispered something in Jia Yun's ear and Yun nodded casually, judging the proposal to be a passing whim of Huan's and not worthy of serious consideration. At that very moment Wang Ren happened along.

'What are you two plotting?' he asked. 'Trying to keep me in the dark, are you?'

Jia Yun communicated to him, *sotto voce*, the substance of Jia Huan's scheme, and Wang Ren clapped his hands enthusiastically.

'Bravo! A capital idea! Lucrative too! But can you really pull it off? If you've the guts to go through with it, I'll back you up. Don't forget I'm her uncle. It's my decision, after all. You just put the plan to Lady Xing, Huan, old chap, while I have a word with Dumbo. If the aunts start asking questions, we must be sure to back each other up with the same story.'

When this conference was over, Wang Ren went to find Dumbo, while Jia Yun went to impart the good news to Ladies Xing and Wang, adding many an enticing embellishment. Lady Wang made a note of the proposal, but was somewhat sceptical. Lady Xing on the other hand, when she heard that her brother knew, seemed in favour of the idea and sent for Dumbo to supply her with more details. Dumbo had already been briefed by Wang Ren (and had needless to say been offered his cut in the profits from the enterprise), and therefore when summoned to his sister's apartment he knew what to say:

'This prince is a very important man. Of course, what you're being asked to consent to is not for her to become a proper wife exactly; but as soon as she goes to him I can guarantee that brother-in-law will get his job back and the family as a whole recover a bit of its old pull.'

Lady Xing had no real mind of her own. She was taken in by Dumbo's story and invited Wang Ren to come and talk the matter over with her. Wang Ren's enthusiastic support for the project finally swayed the balance. She communicated her consent to Jia Yun, while Wang Ren went ahead at once and sent word to the prince's palace.

The prince for his part was unaware of all this behind4he-scenes activity. He was merely planning to despatch some of his ladies to examine the girl's physiognomy and suitability to enter his harem. Jia Yun managed to have a word with the ladies in private beforehand:

'None of the girl's own family know the truth about this. So far as they are concerned, the prince is thinking of taking the girl as one of his wives. Once she is installed, everything will be all right, have no fear. Her grandmother has given her consent, and her uncle Wang Ren is acting as go-between.'

The ladies agreed to co-operate. Jia Yun went to give Lady Xing the latest news, and informed Lady Wang of the 'match'. Li Wan and Bao-chai had no inkling of the truth and received the news of the princely 'wedding' with pleasure.

On the day appointed, several splendidly attired palace ladies arrived, and were received and entertained for a

while by Lady Xing. They were soon aware that the lady with whom they were dealing was of considerable rank, and were most respectful towards her. As the terms of the transaction had not been finally agreed upon, Lady Xing had said nothing to Qiao-jie but had merely informed her that some relatives had come to call and asked her to go out and see them. Qiao-jie, who was little more than a child, and too young to suspect anything, went with her old nanny and Patience, who felt a little uneasy and insisted on accompanying her charge. The minute Qiao-jie entered the room the two palace ladies began subjecting her to a penetrating scrutiny, ogling her entire person, top to toe. They then rose to their feet, took her by the hand and looked her over once more, after which they sat down again for a few minutes and then left. Qiao-jie was most embarrassed by all this staring, and when she returned to her room she sat puzzling it over to herself. She could not recall ever having seen these 'relatives' before, and said as much to Patience, who for her part, as soon as she had seen the way the two women were carrying on, had guessed the truth.

'They're obviously examining her with a view to marriage,' she thought to herself. 'But with Mr Lian away from home, the responsibility for this rests with Lady Xing, and I've no idea which family is involved. A family of the same rank as ours would never go in for all this staring. Anyway, those women didn't look as if they came from one of the royal princely establishments. There was something rather outlandish about them. I'd better not say anything to Qiao-jie for the present, but wait until I know more myself.'

Patience set about discovering the truth of the matter, and since the maids and serving-women concerned had all worked under her at one time or another in the past, they were well disposed and immediately gave her the information she wanted. She was horrified, and racked her brains for some means of averting this catastrophe. She still thought it wiser to say nothing to Qiao-jie, but hurried over to inform Li Wan and Bao-chai, begging them to lay the matter before Lady Wang.

Lady Wang herself had already sensed that there was something amiss, and had said as much to Lady Xing. But Lady Xing was quite taken in by her brother and Wang Ren, and instead of paying any heed to Lady Wang's words, rather suspected some ulterior motive in her opposition to the scheme.

'The girl is of age,' she replied. 'With Lian away from home, the decision in this matter is mine. And besides, my brother and the girl's own uncle have both looked into it thoroughly. Surely they know the truth. I am very much in favour of the idea. And you needn't worry; if anything should go wrong, Lian and I are not going to start laying the blame at your door.'

Lady Wang made some perfunctory reply, but was secretly furious with Lady Xing. She took her leave and went back to tell Bao-chai what had been decided. She wept as she spoke, and Bao-yu tried to console her.

'Mother, don't distress yoursel£ Nothing will come of this scheme. Whatever happens is already written in Qiao-jie's destiny anyway, so please don't try to interfere.'

'Don't be such an idiot!' exclaimed Lady Wang. 'Once they've agreed to this match, they'll be here any day to fetch her away! Patience is right, your cousin Lian will blame me for this when he comes back! I would want the best for *any* member of the family, and especially for Qiao-jie, for her parents' sake. Think of the other girls. We arranged Xiu-yan's marriage to your cousin Ke, and now look how happy they are together! And the Mei family into which Bao-qin has married are by all accounts very comfortably off, so there's no need to worry about her. Xiang-yun, I know, has not been quite so fortunate. That match was her own uncle's idea in the first place, and it would have turned out well if her husband had not fallen ill of a consumption and died. Now the poor girl has vowed to spend the rest of her days a widow. If Qiao-jie falls into bad hands, I shall never forgive myself!'

As she was speaking, Patience came in to consult with Bao-chai and also to learn the results of Lady Wang's meeting with Lady Xing. Lady Wang told her what Lady Xing had said. After a thoughtful silence, Patience fell to her knees.

'Qiao-jie's whole future now depends on you, ma'am!' she pleaded. 'If we deliver her into the hands of those people, it will mean a lifetime of suffering for her. And what do you think Mr Lian will say when he comes

home?'

'You are an intelligent girl,' said Lady Wang. 'Stand up now and listen to what I have to say. In the last resort, Qiao-jie is my sister-in-law's granddaughter, not mine. If Lady Xing wants to take a decision, how can I stand in her way?'

'There is really no cause for concern,' insisted Bao-yu. 'The important thing is to have a clear perception of destiny.'

Patience was afraid that Bao-yu would start raving again and commit some indiscretion, and she remained silent. She had said all that she wanted to say to Lady Wang, and now returned to her own apartment.

Lady Wang's mental distress had brought on a pain in her heart. She summoned a maid to assist her and leaning heavily on her arm struggled back to her own room and lay down. She did not ask Bao- yu and Bao-chai to accompany her, saying that she would feel better after a sleep. But she found it impossible to shake off her troubled mood, and later when she heard that old Mrs Li had called, could not bring herself to rise from her bed and entertain her. Then Jia Lan came in to pay his respects and to deliver a message:

'A letter has come from Grandfather. The boys at the gate have brought it in. Mother was going to give it to you, but as my Grandmother Li has just come, she asked me to bring it instead. Mother will be coming over shortly to talk to you, and bringing my Grandmother Li.'

He handed Lady Wang the letter. Lady Wang asked him, as she took it from him:

'Why is your grandmother here?'

'I don't know myself,' replied Lan. 'I just heard say that there's a letter from Cousin Qi's fiance's family, the Zhens.'

Lady Wang knew that Li Qi had been promised to Zhen Bao-yu, and that the betrothal had already been sealed with the customary gift of tea. It must be that the Zhens wanted to proceed with the wedding, and old Mrs Li had come to discuss some last-minute details. She nodded, and opened the letter from Jia Zheng:

The canal is congested with boats bringing hack the army from its successful campaign on the coast, and my progress has thereby been greatly delayed. I have heard that Tan-chun's husband is travelling to the capital with his father, and wonder if you have heard anything from them? A day or two ago I had a letter from Lian, telling me of brother She's illness. Is there any more news?

The time is drawing near for Bao-yu and Lan to sit their examinations. They must study diligently and on no account must they be allowed to fritter their time away. It will be a few days before I can reach Nanking with Mother's coffin. I am in good health, so don't worry about me.

Please pass on my instructions to Bao-yu and Lan.

Zheng.

Dated the _day of the _month

PS Rong will be writing separately.

After reading the letter, Lady Wang handed it hack to Jia Lan, saying:

'Give this to Bao-yu and tell him to read it. And then give it back to your mother.'

While she was speaking, Li Wan and old Mrs Li came in and paid their respects. They seated themselves, and old Mrs Li spoke about the Zhens and Li Qi's wedding. They discussed this for a while, and then Li Wan asked Lady Wang:

'Have you read Father's letter?'

'I have.'

Jia Lan handed the letter to his mother, who read it herself and said:

‘Tan-chun has been away for over a year and not once come home. It will be such a relief for you now that they are moving up to the capital.’

‘Yes,’ replied Lady Wang. ‘I was in some pain just now, but this piece of news has made me feel much more comfortable. We still don’t know when they’ll be arriving, mind you.’

Old Mrs Li asked how Jia Zheng’s journey had been, while Li Wan turned to Jia Lan and said:

‘I hope you have taken note of what your grandfather says in his letter? The examination is drawing closer, and he is very concerned about you both. You’d better hurry and take the letter for Bao-yu to read.’

‘Please tell me,’ enquired old Mrs Li, ‘how it is that the two of them can take the second examination without having acquired their first degree?’

Lady Wang explained:

‘Before he set out on his posting as Grain Intendant, my husband arranged for the purchase of the Licentiate degree for the two of them.’

Old Mrs Li nodded, and Jia Lan went off with the letter to find Bao-yu.

Having taken his leave of Lady Wang earlier, Bao-yu had returned to his apartment, where he picked up his copy of the ‘Autumn Floods’ chapter from *Zhuan-zi* and began reading it with fascination. When Bao-chai came out from the inner room and saw him so totally absorbed in his reading, she wandered across and glanced at the book’s title. It disappointed her greatly that it should be a Taoist classic.

‘Still the only thing he takes seriously is nonsense like this about quitting the world and rising above the mortal plane”,’ she reflected:

to herself. ‘He’s truly a hopeless case!’

It seemed futile to remonstrate with him, so she just sat by his side, gazing at him reproachfully. Observing her expression, Bao-yu asked:

‘What’s all this about, then?’

‘Since we are husband and wife,’ she replied, ‘I should be able to look to you for lifelong support. Our life together should be built on something more than the passion of a moment. Glory and wealth are as insubstantial as a cloud - that I can understand. But since ancient times, what the sages have prized most has always been virtue, not

Before he had heard her out, Bao-yu put his book down, smiled and said:

‘You talk of virtue and the sages of ancient times. But do you know that the sages also held up as an ideal the “heart of a new-born child”? What *virtues* has the new-born child? None, only a complete absence of knowledge, of consciousness, of greed, of envy. All our lives we sink deeper and deeper into the quagmire of greed, hatred, folly and passion. The great question is, how to rise above all this, how to escape the net of this mortal life? “This floating life, with its meetings and partings” - I can see now why in all the ages since it was first uttered the true meaning of this expression has never been fully grasped. As for your “virtue”, who has ever attained the true pristine state of virtue?’

‘What the ancients meant by the “heart of a new-born child”,’ retorted Bao-chai, ‘was a heart full of loyalty and filial devotion, not this mystical, escapist notion of yours. The Emperors Yao, Shun, Yu, Tang, the Duke of Zhou, Confucius - they all spent their lives improving the lot of mankind. Their “heart of a new-born child” was simply their spirit of compassion and concern for others. Whereas yours, it would seem, leaves you so blissfully unconcerned that you would be willing to forsake your own family. It doesn’t make any sense to me.’

Bao-yu nodded and smiled:

‘Yao and Shun were not able to prevail upon Chao-fu or Xu You to abandon their mountain retreats; nor could King Wu or the Duke of Zhou induce Bo Yi and his brother Shu Qi to involve themselves in the world...’

‘You are becoming more and more absurd!’ interrupted Bao-chai. ‘If all the men of old had been hermits like those four you mention, then there would never have been sages like Yao, Shun, the Duke of Zhou and

Confucius. And besides, it's ridiculous to compare yourself with Bo Yi. Both he and Shu Qi lived in the declining years of the Shang dynasty, and their lives were beset with difficulties of one kind or another. So they had a good pretext for escaping their responsibilities. But your case is totally different. Ours is a golden age, and we ourselves have received numerous favours from the throne, while our ancestors enjoyed lives of luxury. And you yourself have been treasured all your life, both by our late grandmother, and by Mother and Father. Reflect a little on what you said just now. Don't you think that I'm right?'

Bao-yu listened in silence. His only response was to stare at the ceiling and smile.

'Since you're stuck for an answer,' Bao-chai continued, 'you should listen to my advice. Pull yourself together from now on, and work as hard as you can. Do well in the examination, and even if you never achieve anything else in your entire life, that will at least be some return for Heaven's favour and for your ancestors' virtue.'

Bao-yu nodded and heaved a sigh:

'Doing well in the examination is not that difficult. And what you say about *never achieving anything else* and making *some return for Heaven's favour and our ancestors' virtue* is very much to the point ..

Before Bao-chai could reply to this, Aroma put in her word:

'I didn't really understand what Mrs Bao was saying about the sages of old. All I know is that we've all stuck with you through thick and thin since we were children, tending you with more devotion than I can say. Of course, I know that's only as it should be, but shouldn't you show us a little consideration in return? And look at the devotion Mrs Bao has shown to the Master and Her Ladyship, all for your sake! Even if you don't set great store by your marriage, surely you owe her a simple debt of gratitude for what she has done? As for all that stuff about immortality, that's just a lot of hot air. Who ever actually saw an immortal set foot in this world of ours? Some monk turns up from goodness knows where, talking a lot of rubbish, and you go and take him seriously! You're an educated man, surely you don't give more weight to his words than you do to the Master's and Her Ladyship's?'

Bao-yu bowed his head in silence.

Aroma had more ammunition ready, but just then footsteps were heard outside, and a voice came through the window:

'Is Uncle Bao at home?'

Bao-yu recognized Jia Lan's voice, stood up and said pleasantly:

'Come in!'

Jia Lan entered, his face wreathed in smiles. He paid his respects to Bao-yu and Bao-chai, and exchanged greetings with Aroma, before presenting Bao-yu with Jia Zheng's letter, which Ban-yu took from him and read.

'So my sister is coming back to town, then?'

'Judging from the letter it seems more than likely,' was Jia Lan's reply.

Bao-yu nodded his head in thoughtful silence, and Jia Lan continued:

'You see at the end of the letter, Uncle Bao, Grandfather urges us to get down to some serious work. I don't suppose you've been doing many compositions recently, have you?'

Bao-yu laughed:

'I'd like to do a few, just to keep my hand in. Why not? May as well pull the wool over their eyes!'

'In that case,' suggested Jia Lan, 'why don't you propose a few themes, and we'll write them together. That will help us prepare for the exam. I certainly don't want to hand in a blank sheet and make a fool of us both.'

'I know you will do nothing of the kind,' said Bao-yu. Bao-chai asked Jia Lan to take a seat. Bao-yu sat down again himself in his original chair, while Jia Lan perched politely nearby, and they chatted for a while about their compositions, their conversation becoming quite animated. Bao-chai, seeing the two of them thus engrossed, discreetly withdrew, thinking to herself:

'It almost seems as if Bao-yu may have seen the light. But I wonder what he meant just now by picking on my

words “never achieving anything else” and repeating them so emphatically?’

She was still greatly puzzled. Aroma on the other hand was delighted to hear him talking about compositions and the examination.

‘Praise be to Buddha!’ she exclaimed silently to herself ‘What a sermon it took though, to bring him to his senses!’

The boys continued their discussion, and Oriole made them some tea. Jia Lan rose to his feet to receive his cup, and talked a little longer about the regulations governing the examination, adding that he would also like to invite Zhen Bao-yu over one day. Bao-yu seemed willing that he should do so.

After a while, Jia Lan returned to his apartment, leaving Jia Zheng’s letter behind with Bao-yu. Bao-yu read it through again, and with a smile on his lips went in and handed it to Musk to put away. Then he returned and removed his copy of *Zhuang-zi* from the table, collecting up at the same time some of his other favourite esoteric books (a collection that included *The Hermetic Clavicule, The Secret of the Primordial Flower* and *The Compendium of the Five Lamps)*. He gave instructions to Musk, Ripple and Oriole to store all of these away. Bao-chai was amazed to see him do this, and wished to sound out his true motives.

‘It’s very commendable of you to forgo reading such books,’ she said with a quizzical smile. ‘But why do you have to move them out of sight altogether?’

‘Because now I understand,’ replied Bao-yu. ‘None of those books is worth anything. It would be best to burn the lot and be rid of them once and for all!’

Bao-chai was delighted to hear him saying this. But the very next minute she heard him recite, as if to himself:

‘True Buddha Mind Within
Is not in Sutras to be found;
Beyond the Crucible,
There leads a path to Higher Ground.’

Bao-chai did not catch every word, but ‘Buddha Mind Within’ and ‘Higher Ground’ were enough to fill her once more with gloomy forebodings. She watched him anxiously. He told the maids to prepare a quiet room for him, looked out all his old copies of books like Zhucius’s *Neo-Confucian Primer*, and collections of examination essays and verses, and assembled them all in his new room. Then he sat down in earnest and began quietly working. Bao-chai felt she could finally set her mind at rest.

Aroma could hardly believe the evidence of her eyes and ears. She smiled conspiratorially at Bao-chai:

‘You certainly know how to talk him round, ma’am! Just that one lecture from you and he’s a new man! I only hope he hasn’t left it too late. The exams are looming very close.’

Bao-chai nodded and smiled:

‘These things are in the hands of fate. His success will not turn on how soon or late he begins preparing. I just hope that from now on he will learn to be more adult, and give up his old antics.

Checking first that she and Aroma were alone in the room, she added in an undertone:

‘I’m certainly very pleased at this change of heart. But there is still one thing that worries me. His old weakness. We ought to try to isolate him from our own sex.’

‘You are quite right, ma’am,’ said Aroma. ‘So long as he was under the influence of that monk, he seemed to be quite indifferent to the girls around him. But now that he’s changed course again, we must once more be on our guard for a revival of his old habits. I don’t think he’s likely to show much interest in either of us, ma’am. With Nightingale gone, that only leaves the four other maids. Fivey is the little vixen among them, but I hear that her mother has been asking for permission to take her out of service to get married, so she’ll be leaving in a few days’ time. Musk and Ripple have never been particularly close to Master Bao, but we shouldn’t forget that they used to fool about with him when he was a child. That leaves Oriole. He doesn’t seem at all interested in her, and she’s a very dependable girl. I suggest that for day-to-day duties, like pouring tea and carrying

water, Oriole should take charge, with a few of the junior maids to help her. What do you think, ma'am?'

'I have been worrying about the same thing myself' replied Bao-chai. 'Your proposal is a very sensible one.'

So from then on Oriole was put in charge. Bao-yu never left his room now. Every day he sent someone else to pay respects to his mother on his behalf. Lady Wang's delight at this new regime of his needs no description.

When the third of the eighth came round (Grandmother Jia's birthday), Bao-yu went early in the morning to kowtow at her shrine and then returned to his 'quiet room'. After breakfast, Bao-chai, Aroma and some of the maids had gone to sit in the front room and were chatting with Ladies Xing and Wang, and he was sitting alone in his room, deep in concentration, when Oriole carne in with a tray of sweetmeats.

'Her Ladyship asked me to bring these for you,' she said. 'They are offerings left over from Her Old Ladyship's sacrifice.'

Bao-yu rose to his feet to thank her and then sat down again.

'Put them over there,' he said.

As she placed the tray to one side, Oriole said to him in an undertone:

'Her Ladyship has been speaking very highly of you in the front room.'

Bao-yu smiled. Oriole continued:

'She said that now you are studying so hard, you are sure to pass your exam and then if you go on and become a Palace Graduate and an official, your parents' hopes for you will not have been in vain.

Oriole suddenly remembered what Bao-yu had once said to her, the day she had knotted tassels for him.

'I hope you *do* pass!' she went on animatedly. 'It will be such a blessing for our mistress. Remember what you said that day in the Garden, when you asked me to knot you a plum-blossom tassel? You wondered what lucky household the mistress would take me to when she married? Well, you were the lucky one after all!'

There was something about what she said and the way she said it that aroused in Bao-yu once more an old and all too human emotion. But the nostalgia soon passed; he composed himself again and said with a gentle smile:

'So, according to you, I am lucky, and so is your mistress. But how do *you* feel about it?'

Oriole flushed at once, and forced a smile:

'We're just maids. Being lucky or not doesn't really enter into it for us.'

Bao-yu smiled again:

'As a matter of fact, even if you did spend your whole life as a maid, you might turn out to have been luckier than either of us.'

This sounded to Oriole like more of his foolishness. She was afraid of being responsible for another of his scenes, and deemed it prudent to leave, but before she could do so, Bao-yu laughed:

'Silly girl! Let me tell you something.'

If you want to know what it was, you must turn to the next chapter.

CHAPTER 119

Bao-yu becomes a Provincial Graduate
and severs worldly ties
The House of Jia receives Imperial favour
and renews ancestral glory

As we told in the last chapter, Oriole, perplexed by Bao-yu's words, had been about to leave when she heard him speak again:

'Silly girl! Let me tell you something. If your mistress is lucky, then so are you, since you are her maid. Aroma

cannot be depended upon. In future, mark my words, you must look after your mistress with care and devotion, and in the end you may receive a fitting reward for your years of service.'

To Oriole Bao-yu's speech, although it began with some semblance of sense, tailed off into rambling nonsense.

'Well,' she replied, 'I'd better be going now. Madam is waiting for me. If you want any more sweets, Mr Bao, just send one of the junior maids to fetch me.'

Bao-yu nodded and Oriole went on her way. Shortly afterwards, Bao-chai and Aroma returned from the front room.

*

The time drew near for the examination. All the family were full of eager anticipation, hoping that the two boys would write creditable compositions and bring the family honour. All except for Bao-chai; while it was true that Bao-yu had prepared well, she had also on occasions noticed a strange indifference in his behaviour. Her first concern. was that the two boys, for both of whom this was the first venture of its kind, might get hurt or have some accident in the crush of men and vehicles around the examination halls. She was more particularly worried for Bao-yu, who had not been out at all since his encounter with the monk. His delight in studying seemed to her the result of a somewhat too hasty and not altogether convincing conversion, and she had a premonition that something untoward was going to happen. So, on the day before the big event, she despatched Aroma and a few of the junior maids to go with Candida and her helpers and make sure that the candidates were both properly prepared. She herself inspected their things and put them out in readiness, and then went over with Li Wan to Lady Wang's apartment, where she selected a few of the more trusty family retainers to accompany them the next day, for fear they might be jolted or trampled on in the crowds.

The big day finally arrived, and Bao-yu and Jia Lan changed into smart but unostentatious clothes. They came over m high spirits to bid farewell to Lady Wang, who gave them a few parting words of advice:

'This is the first examination for both of you, and although you are such big boys now, it will still be the first time either of you has been away from me for a whole day. You may have gone out m the past, but you were always surrounded by your maids and nurses. You have never spent the night away on your own like this. Today, when you both go into the examination, you are bound to feel rather lonely with none of the family by you. You must take special care. Finish your papers and come out as early as possible, and then be sure to find one of the family servants and come home as soon as you can. We shall be worrying about you.'

As she spoke, Lady Wang herself was greatly moved by the occasion. Jia Lan made all the appropriate responses, but Bao-yu remained silent until his mother had quite finished speaking. Then he walked up to her, knelt at her feet and with tears streaming down his cheeks kowtowed to her three times and said:

'I could never repay you adequately for all you have done for me, Mother. But if I can do this one thing successfully, if I can do my very best and pass this examination, then perhaps I can bring you a little pleasure. Then my worldly duty will be accomplished and I will at least have made some small return for all the trouble I have caused you.'

Lady Wang was still more deeply moved by this:

'It is a very fine thing, what you are setting out to do. It is only a shame that your grandmother couldn't be here to witness it.'

She wept as she spoke and put her arms around him to draw him to her. Bao-yu remained kneeling however and would not rise.

'Even though Grandmother is not here,' he said, 'I am sure she knows about it and is happy. So really it is just as if she were present. What separates us is only matter. We are together in spirit.'

Li Wan feared that this scene might provoke Bao-yu to one of his fits. Besides, she sensed something inauspicious. She hurried forward:

‘Mother, today we should be filled with joy. You mustn’t upset yourself like this. Think how sensible and dutiful and hard-working Bao-yu has been of late. All he needs to do now is to sit the examinations with Lan, write his papers properly and come home early. Then he can show copies of what he has written to some scholars connected with the family, and we’ll just wait for the good news.’

She told one of the maids to help Bao-yu to his feet. Bao-yu turned and bowed to her:

‘Sister-in-law, you are not to worry. Lan and I are sure to pass. What is more, Lan has a brilliant future ahead of him, while you yourself will one day become a lady of noble rank and dress in the finest robes.’

Li Wan smiled:

‘If all this were ever to come true, it would at least be some compensation…’

She stopped short, fearing to cause Lady Wang further distress. Bao-yu felt no such inhibition:

‘If Lan does well and upholds our family tradition, my late brother may not have lived to witness it, but you will at least see his dearest wishes fulfilled.’

It was getting late, and since Li Wan did not wish to prolong this exchange any further, she contented herself with a brief nod. Bao-chai had already perceived the strangeness of the conversation. Not only were Bao-yu’s remarks ominous in themselves, but every word uttered by Lady Wang and Li Wan seemed laden with inauspicious meaning as well. Not daring to express this presentiment of hers openly, Bao-chai held back her tears and remained silent. Bao-yu came up to her and made her a deep bow. It seemed to them all such an eccentric way to behave, and no one could imagine what it was supposed to mean; nor did anyone dare to laugh. The general amazement increased when Bao-chai burst into floods of tears, and Bao-yu bade her farewell:

‘Coz! I’m going now. Stay here with Mother and wait for the good news!’

‘It is time for you to go,’ replied Bao-chai. ‘There is no need to embark on another of your long speeches.’

‘Strange that you should be urging me on my way,’ said Bao-yu. ‘I know it is time to go.’

He glanced around him and saw that Xi-chun and Nightingale were absent.

‘Say goodbye to Xi-chun and Nightingale for me,’ he said. ‘I shall certainly be meeting them again.’

Everyone was forcibly struck by the strange blend of sense and nonsense in Bao-yu’s words. They thought him momentarily confused, in part by the unprecedented nature of the occasion, in part by Lady Wang’s injunctions. To all of them the best course of action in the circumstances seemed to be to speed him on his way and get the thing over with.

‘They’re waiting for you outside. No more dilly~dallying now, or you’ll be late.’

Bao-yu raised his head and laughed.

‘Off I go! Enough of this foolery! It’s over!’

‘Well - off you go then!’ they all cried, laughing nervously. Only Lady Wang and Bao-chai were sobbing inconsolably, as if they were parting from him for ever. Finally Bao-yu walked out through the door and on his way, giggling like a half-wit.

Entering the lists of worldly renown,
He breaks the first bar of his earthly cage.

*

We must leave Bao-yu and Jia Lan on their way to the examination, and return to Jia Huan. The excitement surrounding the candidates’ departure had left him feeling even more peeved and sour than usual, and with their absence he was now free to carry out his plan:

‘My own mother *will* be avenged! Now there’s not a man left in the house, and Aunt Xing will do as I say. I need fear no one.’

With determined stride he hurried over to Lady Xing's to pay her his respects, and then conversed with her for a while in a most obsequious tone. She was naturally flattered, and said to him:

'Now you are speaking like an intelligent child! Or course I'm the one who ought to take the decision in an affair such as this of Qiao-jie's. It was very stupid of your cousin Lian to ignore his own mother and place this in someone else's hands.'

'So far as the prince is concerned, your side of the family is the one

that he recognizes,' said Jia Huan. 'The whole thing is settled, and now they are preparing to send you a large consignment of presents. With this prince married to your granddaughter, Uncle She is bound to be given an important position. It will benefit us all. I don't want to sound critical of Mother, but all the time sister Yuan-chun was an Imperial Concubine, it didn't prevent them from treating some of us very shoddily. I hope Qiao-jie will be less ungrateful. I must have a word with her.'

'Yes, you should speak to her,' said Lady Xing. 'It will give her a chance to see how much you've done for her. I am sure if her father were at home he would never have found her such a good match! That foolish creature Patience has been saying things against it and protesting that your mother disapproves. It is probably nothing more than sour grapes on their part. We must lose no time, or Lian will be back and then they will set him against the idea too and we'll never be able to go through with it.'

'So far as the prince is concerned, the matter is already settled,' said Jia Huan. 'They are only waiting for you to send over the horoscope. Then, according to their princely customs, she will be fetched three days later for the wedding. There is however one condition that you may object to. They say that in view of the circumstances, because it is not quite proper to marry the granddaughter of a disgraced official, they will have to take her away quietly without any ceremony. Later, when Uncle She has been pardoned and reinstated in office, they can celebrate the union with all the usual festivities.'

'Of course I agree,' said Lady Xing. 'What they suggest is only correct.'

'In that case all you have to do now is give them the Eight Characters for Qiao-jie's horoscope.'

'Silly boy! What can we womenfolk do? You'd better ask Yun to write them out for you.'

Jia Huan was delighted by Lady Xing's response and agreed at once to this proposal, which suited him perfectly. He hurried over to have a word with Jia Yun, and asked Wang Ren to go to the prince's palace to sign the contract and receive the money.

The conversation between Jia Huan and Lady Xing had been overheard by one of Lady Xing's maids who owed her appointment to Patience and who therefore, as soon as an opportunity presented itself, went straight to see Patience and told her the gist of what was happening. Patience had known all along that no good would come of this marriage plan, and had already told Qiao-jie all that she knew about it. When she first learnt that she was to be married, Qiao-jie had cried all night long; she demanded that they wait for her father's return before making a decision, and insisted that there was no need to obey Lady Xing. Now, when this latest news arrived, she began howling and wanted to go and complain to Lady Xing herself. Patience hastened to prevent her:

'You must calm down, miss. Lady Xing is your own grandmother, and with your father away she has every right to make these decisions. Besides, your own uncle is acting as go-between. They're all in this together, and you're on your own. You'll never make them change their minds. And I am only a maid, I can say nothing. We must try to think of a plan ourselves, and not do anything rash!'

'You'd better be quick,' advised Lady Xing's maid, 'or it will be too late. The bridal chair will be here any day now and then Miss Qiao-jie will be taken away.'

With these gloomy words she returned to Lady Xing's apartment. Patience turned round to see Qiao-jie huddled up and weeping disconsolately to herself. She reached out a hand to comfort her:

'It's no use crying, miss. There's nothing your father can do for you now. From what they've been saying, it seems as if...'

Before she could complete her sentence, a messenger arrived from Lady Xing's and announced:
'This is indeed a happy day for Miss Qiao-jie! Will Patience please prepare whatever Miss Qiao-jie will need to take with her. Her trousseau can wait until Mr Lian's return.'
Patience was going through the motions of obeying these instructions, when Lady Wang arrived. Qiao-jie hugged her tightly and wept into her bosom. Lady Wang was in tears herself:
'Try not to worry, child. I've spoken to your grandmother and done everything I can for you, and I've received nothing but insults for my pains. I can't make her change her mind. We can only go along with it, and try to delay things as much as possible. Meanwhile we must send someone straight to your father to tell him what is going on.'
'But haven't you heard, ma'am?' said Patience. 'Early this morning Master Huan was over at Her Ladyship's. According to this prince's custom the bride will be fetched in three days. Her Ladyship has already asked Mr Yun to prepare the horoscope. By the time Mr Lian returns it will all be over!'
When she heard that Huan was involved, Lady Wang was speechless with rage. Eventually she stammered out, 'Bring him to me! Bring him to me at once!' A servant went in obedience to her command, but returned to report that Master Huan had gone out early that morning with Mr Jia Qiang and Mr Wang Ren.
'Where's young Yun?' asked Lady Wang.
'We don't know,' was the reply.
The people gathered in Qiao-jie's room stood staring impotently around them. Lady Wang lacked the nerve to go and challenge Lady Xing directly. They all wept bitterly on each other's shoulders.
Just as their spirits had sunk to these depths of gloom, a serving woman came in to announce that Grannie Liu had arrived at the back gate of the mansion.
'We're all at sixes and sevens,' was Lady Wang's comment. 'How can we start receiving guests at a moment like this? Find some excuse and ask her to leave.'
'Perhaps you should ask her in, ma'am,' said Patience. 'After all she is Qiao-jie's godmother. We should tell her what is happening.'
Lady Wang said nothing. The serving-woman left the room and reappeared shortly with Grannie Liu, who exchanged greetings with all the ladies present Seeing their eyes **red** from weeping, and having no idea what the matter was, Grannie Liu asked, with some hesitation:
'What is the trouble? It's Mrs Lian you're grieving for, I'll be hound.'
The mention of her mother set Qiao-jie weeping with renewed abandon.
'There's no point in avoiding the issue, Grannie,' said Patience. As her godmother you ought to know the truth.'
She went on to tell Grannie Liu the whole story. At first the old dame was aghast. Then, after a long silence, she suddenly laughed.
'A smart young woman like you ought to be able to hit on something without much difficulty. Look at the drum ballads, they are full of clever plots and schemes for getting people out of scrapes like this one.'
'Oh, Grannie!' begged Patience. 'If you can think of a way, please tell us quickly!'
'It's easy,' said the old dame. 'We mustn't tell a soul, though, and we must be sure to make a quick getaway and hide - that's all that's needed.'
'You can't be serious!' protested Patience. 'Where could someone from a family like ours possibly hide?'
'Well,' said Grannie Liu, 'if you're willing - and that's the only if-then you can both come to our village. I can keep Miss Qiao-jie hidden and at the same time I'll tell my son-in-law to send a man with a letter (which Miss Qiao-jie must write with her own hand) straight to Mr Lian. Once *he* arrives on the scene, everything can be mended well enough.'
'And if Lady Xing finds out meanwhile?' asked Patience.
'Do they know that I'm here?' asked Grannie Liu.

‘Lady Xing is living at the front, and as she treats people so harshly no one ever tells her what’s going on. If you’d come in by the front gate she might have known. As it is, we have nothing to fear.’

‘Well then,’ said Grannie Liu, ‘let us agree on a time, and then I’ll tell my son-in4aw to send a cart for you both.’

‘There’s not a moment to be lost,’ urged Patience. ‘I’ll be as quick as I can.’

She went into the inner room with Lady Wang, and having dismissed all the servants explained Grannie Liu’s plan to her. Lady Wang considered it carefully, and judged it altogether too risky.

‘But it’s our only hope!’ pleaded Patience. ‘I can speak my mind to you, ma’am. This is what I think you should do. You must pretend to know nothing about it; later you can even go to Lady Xing’s and ask her where Qia-jie has gone. We’ll send a message to Mr Lian, and surely he won’t be long coming.’

Lady Wang was silent, and heaved a deep sigh. Qiao-jie had heard them talking and added her entreaties to those of Patience:

‘Oh Auntie, please! Save me! I know how grateful Father will be to you when he returns.’

‘We *must* go ahead with our plan,’ said Patience decisively. ‘You can return to your own apartment, ma’am. But please send someone to keep an eye on Qiao-jie’s room.’

‘Very well then - but be secret about it!’ urged Lady Wang. ‘And both of you, remember to take plenty of clothes and bedding with you.’

‘We must leave quickly if we are to succeed,’ said Patience. ‘If they come back with the contract signed, we’ll be done for!’

This seemed to bring Lady Wang to her senses:

‘Yes! Of course! You must hurry! You can depend on me!’ Lady Wang returned to her own apartment, and then went to engage Lady Xing in conversation and thus hold her at bay.

Patience despatched a servant to prepare their things, with instructions not to seem too furtive about it. ‘If anyone comes in and sees what you are doing, just say that you are acting on Lady Xing’s instructions, and that you’re ordering a carriage for Grannie Liu to go home in.’ Meanwhile the men on the back gate were bribed and told to hire a carriage. Patience dressed Qiao-jie to look like Grannie Liu’s granddaughter Qing-er, and hurried out with her. She pretended to be seeing the ‘Liu family’ off, and then at the last minute jumped into the carriage herself. Although the back gate had recently been kept open, there were only one or two men on regular duty; as for the various other domestic servants, the mansion was so large and understaffed - indeed almost deserted - that their departure was sure to go virtually unnoticed. Besides, Lady Xing had a reputation for meanness with the servants, and they disapproved of what they knew she was planning to do to Qiao-jie. They were therefore very much on Patience’s side and only too willing to connive at Qia-jie’s escape. Lady Xing was thus successfully engaged in conversation with Lady Wang, and remained completely unaware of the escape.

Lady Wang was still most apprehensive. After talking to Lady Xing she made her way to Bao-chai’s, trying to attract as little attention as possible, and sat there, her mind filled with doubts as to the safety of the enterprise. Seeing how distracted she was, Bao-chai asked her what was on her mind, and Lady Wang explained everything to her in confidence.

‘How very dangerous!’ exclaimed Bao-chai. ‘We must find Yun quickly and order him to halt matters at his end at once.’

‘But I can’t even find Huan!’ complained Lady Wang.

‘You must carry on as if you know nothing at all,’ advised Bao-chai. ‘I shall find someone to inform Aunt Xing.’

Lady Wang nodded and left Bao-chai to proceed with her plan.

*

Our story now turns to the Mongol prince himself. This gentleman was in fact doing no more than looking for

a couple of presentable young concubines to add to his harem, and on the strength of a professional broker's recommendation had sent two of his women to examine Qiao-jie. When they returned, and when their master questioned them about the young lady's provenance, they did not dare conceal the truth. The prince was deeply shocked to learn that she was from such an old and noble family:

'But this is monstrous! Such a thing is strictly forbidden! I have come close to committing a grave crime! Besides, I have already been received in audience by His Majesty and will shortly be choosing a suitable day to start on my return journey. If anyone should come to pursue this matter further, send him packing!'

This was precisely the day on which Jia Yun and Wang Ren were delivering Qiao-jie's horoscope to the palace. When they arrived they met with a brusque reception:

'His Highness has instructed that any person daring to misrepresent a member of the Jia family as a common citizen is to be arrested and dealt with according to due process of law! What an outrageous way to behave in these peaceful times!'

Wang Ren and Jia Yun skulked off at once with their tails between their legs, grumbling to themselves that someone had betrayed them and going their separate ways in extremely low spirits.

Jia Huan was at home waiting for news, and had become very agitated when he received Lady Wang's summons. He saw Jia Yun returning home on his own, and rushed up to him:

'Well? Is everything arranged?'

Jia Yun stamped his foot frantically:

'It's terrible! Something's gone badly wrong! I can't think who can have given us away.'

He told the whole story to Huan, who was at first speechless with rage, then burst out:

'Only this morning I was at Aunt Xing's singing the praises of this match; now what am I supposed to do? You're all trying to ruin me!'

Just as they were wondering how to save the situation, a confused hubbub reached them from the inner apartments. They heard their own names called, 'wanted by Their Ladyships', and slunk shamefacedly into Lady Wang's apartment.

'A fine mess you've made of things!' exclaimed Lady Wang, waiting for them with fury written on her face. 'Well, now you've driven Qia-jie and Patience to their deaths! The least you can do is bring me back their corpses!'

They both knelt at her feet. Jia Huan did not dare to open his mouth, but Jia Yun bowed his head and said:

'I would never have dared to do it myself. We only mentioned this match to you, Great-aunts, because Great-uncle Xing and Uncle Wang suggested it. It was all their idea. Then Great-aunt Xing agreed to it and asked me to write out the horoscope. Now the other party wants to back out. How can you accuse us of driving Qiao-jie to her death?'

'Huan told your great-aunt Xing that they would be arriving in three days to take the girl away,' said Lady Wang. 'Whoever heard of a proper wedding being conducted in such a hurry? I shall ask no more questions. Just give me back Qiao-jie. We shall see what Sir Zheng decides to do with you when he returns.'

Lady xing wept in silent shame. Lady Wang turned next on Jia Huan:

'That harpy Aunt Zhao evidently left behind her a son every bit as vile as herself!'

She called one of her maids to support her and retired to her bedroom.

Left on their own Jia Huan, Jia Yun and Lady Xing began to indulge in mutual recrimination, until finally one of them said:

'What's the use of blaming each other like this? The girl probably isn't dead at all. Patience has almost certainly taken her off to hide in the home of a relative.'

Lady Xing summoned the janitors from the front and rear gates and after giving them a good scolding asked them where Qiao-jie and Patience had gone.

'It's no good asking us, ma'am,' they replied with one voice. 'Ask one of the stewards, they're the ones who

ought to know. We wouldn't advise you to make a scene, ma'am. If Lady Wang should choose to question us, there's plenty we could tell. And if one person is beaten or given the sack, it will have to be everyone. Since Mr Lian left it's been a sheer disgrace what has been going on in the front of the mansion. We haven't even received our wages or monthly grain allowance, but *they*'ve been drinking and gambling away, fooling around with pretty little actors, inviting girls into the house--is that how masters of the family are supposed to behave?'

Jia Yun and Jia Huan were silent. A servant arrived from Lady Wang's with renewed orders to 'hurry up and find Patience and Qiao-jie', which sent them into another flurry of desperate activity. They did not even bother to question the servants in Qiao-jie's own apartment, knowing they would be too hostile to reveal the where-abouts of the missing pair (though this was hardly something they could say to Lady Wang). Instead they had to go asking at the home of every relative, and still failed to unearth the slightest clue. Lady Xing in the inner apartments and Jia Huan in the outer spent a hectic few days and nights.

At last came the day when the examinations were due to be concluded and the students released from their cells. Lady Wang was eagerly awaiting the return of Bao-yu and Jia Lan, and when midday came and there was still no sign of either of them, she, Li Wan and Bao-chai all began to worry and sent one servant after another to find out what had become of them. The servants could obtain no news, and not one of them dared to return empty-handed. Later another batch was despatched on the same mission, with the same result. The three ladies were beside themselves with anxiety.

When evening came, someone returned at last: it was Jia Lan. They were delighted to see him, and immediately asked:

'Where is Bao-yu?'

He did not even greet them but burst into tears.

'Lost!' he sobbed.

For several minutes Lady Wang was struck dumb. Then she collapsed senseless onto her couch. Luckily Suncloud and one or two other maids were at hand to support her, and they brought her round, themselves sobbing hysterically the while. Bao-chai stared in front of her with a glazed expression in her eyes, while Aroma sobbed her heart out. The only thing they could find time to do between their fits of sobbing was to scold Jia Lan:

'Fool! You were with Bao-yu - how could he get lost?'

'Before the examinations we stayed in the same room, we ate together and slept together. Even when we went in we were never far apart, we were always within sight of each other. This morning Uncle Bao finished his paper early and waited for me. We handed in our papers at the same time and left together. When we reached the

> Dragon Gate outside there was a big crowd and I lost sight of him. The servants who had come to fetch us asked me where he was and Li Gui told them: "One minute he was just over there clear as daylight, the next minute he was gone. How can he have disappeared so suddenly in the crowd?" I told Li Gui and the others to split up into search parties, while I took some men and looked in all the cubicles. But there was no sign of him. That's why I'm so late back.'

Lady Wang had been sobbing throughout this, without saying a word. Bao-chai had already more or less guessed the truth. Aroma continued to weep inconsolably. Jia Qiang and the other men needed no further orders but set off immediately in several directions to join in the search. It was a sad sight, with everyone in the lowest of spirits and the welcome-home party prepared in vain. Jia Lan forgot his own exhaustion and wanted to go out with the others. But Lady Wang kept him back:

'My child! Your uncle is lost; if we lost you as well, it would be more than we could bear! You have a rest now, there's a good boy!'

He was reluctant to stay behind, but acquiesced when You-shi added her entreaties to Lady Wang's.

The only person present who seemed unsurprised was Xi-chun. She did not feel free to express her thoughts, but instead enquired of Bao-chai:

'Did Bao-yu have his jade with him when he left?'

'Of course he did,' she replied. 'He never goes anywhere without it.'

Xi-chun was silent. Aroma remembered how they had had to waylay Bao-yu and snatch the jade from his hands, and she had an overwhelming suspicion that today's mishap was that monk's doing too. Her heart ached with grief, tears poured down her cheeks and she began wailing despondently. Memories flooded back of the affection Bao-yu had shown her. 'I annoyed him sometimes, I know, and then he'd be cross. But he always had a way of making it up. He was so kind to me, and so thoughtful. In heated moments he often would vow to become a monk. I never believed him. And now he's gone!'

It was two o'clock in the morning by now, and still there was no sign of Bao-yu. Li Wan, afraid that Lady Wang would injure herself through excess of grief, did her best to console her and advised her to retire to bed. The rest of the family accompanied her to her room, except for Lady Xing who returned to her own apartment, and Jia Huan who was still lying low and had not dared to make an appearance at all. Lady Wang told Jia Lan to go back to his room, and herself spent a sleepless night. Next day at dawn some of the servants despatched the previous day returned, to report that they had searched everywhere and failed to find the slightest trace of Bao-yu. During the morning a stream of relations including Aunt Xue, Xue Ke, Shi Xiang-yun, Bao-qin and old Mrs Li came to enquire after Lady Wang's health and to ask for news of Bao-yu.

After several days of this, Lady Wang was so consumed with grief that she could neither eat nor drink, and her very life seemed in danger. Then suddenly a servant announced a messenger from the Commandant of the Haimen Coastal Region, who brought news that Tan-chun was due to arrive in the capital the following day. Although this could not totally dispel her grief at Bao-yu's disappearance, Lady Wang felt some slight comfort at the thought of seeing Tan-chun again. The next day, Tan-chun arrived at Rong-guo House and they all went out to the front to greet her, finding her lovelier than ever and most prettily dressed. When Tan-chun saw how Lady Wang had aged, and how red-eyed everyone in the family was, tears sprang to her eyes, and it was a while before she could stop weeping and greet them all properly. She was also distressed to see Xi-chun in a nun's habit, and wept again to learn of Bao-yu's strange disappearance and the many other family misfortunes. But she had always been gifted with a knack of finding the right thing to say, and her natural equanimity restored a degree of calm to the gathering and gave some real comfort to Lady Wang and the rest of the family. The next day her husband came to visit, and when he learned how things stood he begged her to stay at home and console her family. The maids and old serving-women who had accompanied her to her new home were thus granted a welcome reunion with their old friends.

The entire household, masters and servants alike, still waited anxiously day and night for news of Bao-yu. Very late one night, during the fifth watch, some servants came as far as the inner gate, announcing that they had indeed wonderful news to report, and a couple of the junior maids hurried in to the inner apartments, without stopping to inform the senior maids.

'Ma'am, ladies!' they announced. 'Wonderful news!'

Lady Wang thought that Bao-yu must at last have been found and rising from her bed she exclaimed with delight:

'Where did they find him? Send him in at once to see me!'

'He has been placed seventh on the roll of successful candidates!' the maid cried.

'But has he been found?'

The maid was silent. Lady Wang sat down again.

'*Who* came seventh?' asked Tan-chun.

'Mr Bao.'

As they were talking they heard a voice outside shouting:

'Master Lan has passed too!'

A servant went hurrying out to receive the official notice, on which it was written that Jia Lan had been placed one hundred and thirtieth on the roll.

Since there was still no news of Bao-yu's whereabouts, Li Wan did not feel free to express her feelings of pride and joy; and Lady Wang, delighted as she was that Jia Lan had passed, could not help thinking to herself:

'If only Bao-yu were here too, what a happy celebration it would be!'

Bao-chai alone was still plunged in gloom, though she felt it inappropriate to weep. The others were busy offering their congratulations and trying to look on the cheerful side:

'Since it was Bao-yu's fate to pass, he cannot remain lost for long. In a day or two he is sure to be found.

This plausible suggestion brought a momentary smile to Lady Wang's cheeks, and the family seized on this opportunity to persuade her to eat and drink a little. A moment later Tealeaf's voice could be heard calling excitedly from the inner gate:

'Now that Mr Bao has passed, he is sure to be found soon!'

'What makes you so sure of that?' they asked him.

'There's a saying: "If a man once passes the examination, the whole world learns his name." Now everyone will know Mr Bao's name wherever he goes, and someone will be sure to bring him home.'

'That Tealeaf may be a cheeky little devil, but there's something in what he says,' agreed the maids.

Xi-chun differed:

'How could a grown man like Bao-yu be lost? If you ask me, he has deliberately severed his ties with the world and chosen the life of a monk. And in that case he *will* be hard to find.'

This set the ladies weeping all over again.

'It is certainly true,' said Li Wan, 'that since ancient times many men have renounced worldly rank and riches to become Buddhas or Saints.'

'But if he rejects his own mother and father,' sobbed Lady Wang, 'then he's failing in his duty as a son. And in that case how can he ever hope to become a Saint or a Buddha?'

'It is best to be ordinary,' commented Tan-chun. 'Bao-yu was always different. He had that jade of his ever since he was born, and everyone always thought it lucky. But looking back, I can see that it's brought him nothing but bad luck. If a few more days go by and we still cannot find him - I don't want to upset you, Mother but I think in that case we must resign ourselves to the fact that this is something decreed by fate and beyond our understanding. It would be better not to think of him as having ever been born from your womb. His destiny is after all the fruit of karma, the result of your accumulated merit in several lifetimes.'

Bao-chai listened to this in silence. Aroma could bear it no longer; her heart ached, she felt dizzy and sank to the ground in a faint. Lady Wang seemed most concerned for her, and told one of the maids to help her up.

Jia Huan was feeling extremely out of sorts. On top of his disgrace in the Qiao-jie affair, there was now the added humiliation of having to watch both his brother and nephew pass their examinations. He cursed Qiang and Yun for having dragged him into this trouble. Tan-chun was sure to take him to task now that she was back. And yet he dared not try to hide. He was altogether in a state of abject misery.

The next day Jia Lan had to attend court to give thanks for his successful graduation. There he met Zhen Bao-yu and discovered that he too had passed. So now all three of them belonged to the same 'class'. When Lan mentioned Bao-yu's strange disappearance, Zhen Bao-yu sighed and offered a few words of consolation.

The Chief Examiner presented the successful candidates' compositions to the throne, and His Majesty read

them through one by one and found them all to be well balanced and cogent, displaying both breadth of learning and soundness of judgement. When he
noticed two Nanking Jias in seventh and one hundred and thirtieth place, he asked if they were any relation of the late Jia Concubine. One of his ministers went to summon Jia Bao-yu and Jia Lan for questioning on this matter. Jia Lan, on arrival, explained the circumstances of his uncle's disappearance and gave a full account of the three preceding generations of the family, all of which was transmitted to the throne by the minister. His Majesty, as a consequence of this information, being a monarch of exceptional enlightenment and compassion, instructed his minister, in consideration of the family's distinguished record of service, to submit a full report on their case. This the minister did and drafted a detailed memorial on the subject. His Majesty's concern was such that on reading this memorial he ordered the minister to re-examine the facts that had led to Jia She's conviction. Subsequently the Imperial eye lighted upon yet another memorial describing the success of the recent campaign to quell the coastal disturbances, 'causing the seas to be at peace and the rivers to be cleansed, and leaving the honest citizenry free to pursue their livelihood unmolested once more. His Majesty was overjoyed at this good news and ordered his council of ministers to deliberate on suitable rewards and also to pronounce a general amnesty throughout the Empire.

When Jia Lan had left court and had gone to pay his respects to his examiner, he learned of the amnesty and hurried home to tell Lady Wang and the rest of the family. They all seemed delighted, though their pleasure was marred by Bao-yu's continued absence. Aunt Xue was particularly happy at the news, and set about making preparations for the payment of Xue Pan's fine, since his death sentence would now be commuted as part of the amnesty.

A few days later it was announced that Zhen Bao-yu and his father had called to offer their congratulations, and Lady Wang sent Jia Lan out to receive them. Shortly afterwards Jia Lan returned with a broad smile on his face:

'Good news, Grandmother! Uncle Zhen Bao-yu's father has heard at court of an edict pardoning both Great-uncle She and Uncle Zhen from Ning-guo House, and restoring the hereditary Ning-guo rank to Uncle Zhen. Grandfather is to keep the hereditary Rong-guo rank and after his period of mourning will be reinstated as a Permanent Secretary in the Board of Works. All the family's confiscated property is to be restored. His Majesty has read Uncle Bao's composition and was extremely struck by it. When he discovered that the candidate concerned was Her Late Grace's younger brother, and when the Prince of Bei-jing added a few words of commendation, His Majesty expressed a desire to summon him to court for an audience. The ministers then told him that Uncle Bao had disappeared after the examination (it was I who informed them of this in the first place), and that he was at present being looked for everywhere, without success, whereupon His Majesty issued another edict, ordering all the garrisons in the capital to make a thorough search for him. You can set your mind at rest now, Grandmother. With His Majesty taking a personal interest in the matter, Uncle Bao is sure to be found!'

Lady Wang and the rest of the family were delighted and congratulated each other on this new turn of events.

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Meanwhile Jia Huan and his accomplices were still on tenterhooks, searching everywhere for Qiao-jie, who having left the city with Patience and Grannie Liu had meanwhile arrived in the village and been installed in Grannie Liu's best room, specially cleaned out for the occasion. Although their daily diet was simple village fare, it was wholesome and clean, and with little Qing-er to keep them company they had relatively few cares. There were a few quite well-off families in the village, who when they heard that there was a Miss Jia staying at Grannie Liu's insisted on coming to have a look for themselves.

They all waxed eloquent on the subject of her fairylike appearance and sent presents of fruit, fresh produce and game. In fact, Qiao-jie's presence caused a considerable stir. The richest family were the Zhous, whose wealth was composed partly of money and partly of extensive holdings of land. They had one son in the family, a cultivated, fine-looking lad of fourteen, who had studied with a family tutor and had recently passed the preliminary Licentiate exam. When his mother set eyes on Qiao-jie she was lost in admiration.

'What a pity!' she thought to herself, with a deep inner sigh of regret. 'A boy from a country family like ours would never be thought fit for such a well-bred young lady.' She stood there for some time deep in thought, and Grannie Liu soon guessed what was on her mind.

'I know what you're thinking,' she said. 'Why don't I propose the match for you?'

Mrs Zhou laughed:

'Don't go making fun of me! A great family like theirs, stoop to the likes of us!'

'Well, it'd do no harm to suggest it,' replied Grannie Liu. 'And we shall see.'

The two of them left it at that and went their separate ways.

Grannie Liu was concerned to know the latest developments at Rong-guo House and sent Ban-er into town to find out. He reached Two Dukes Street to find a throng of carriages outside the two mansions, and stationed himself close by to glean what news he could. This is what he overheard:

'Both families have had their ranks restored and all their confiscated property returned. Things are looking up for them again. But young Bao-yu has disappeared without trace after passing his exams.'

Ban-er was delighted to hear of the family's restoration to favour and was just setting off home to carry the good news back to his grandmother when he saw several horses pull up outside the gates. The riders dismounted and the gatemen saluted with one knee on the ground:

'Welcome home, sir! And congratulations! How is Sir She's health?'

'Better,' replied the young man who had first dismounted. 'And he has received His Majesty's gracious permission to return home.' After a short pause he asked: 'What are those men doing over there?'

'His Majesty sent an official here with a decree. They require a member of the family to receive back all the confiscated property.'

The young master strode in cheerfully, and Ban-er, concluding that it must be Jia Lian, did not wait for any further news but hastened home to inform Grannie Liu. A smile spread across the old lady's face when she heard, and she went at once to tell Qiao-jie and congratulate her on the good news.

'We owe everything to you, Grannie,' said Patience with a grateful smile. 'Without your help Miss Qiao-jie would never have lived to see this happy day.'

Qiao-jie herself was even more excited. Presently the messenger who had been sent with a letter to Jia Lian returned.

'Mr Lian says he is extremely grateful. He asks me to escort Miss Qia-jie home at once, and to give you this handsome reward.'

Grannie Liu was highly satisfied that all had turned out for the best, and she sent someone to fetch two carts. When she asked Qiao-jie and Patience to make use of them for their return journey, they seemed reluctant to leave. They had grown accustomed to Grannie Liu's home, and little Qing-er was in tears because her new friends were being taken from her. Grannie Liu, seeing how attached they had become to one another, told Qing-er that she could travel with them in the carts into town. And so they hurried back to Rong-guo House.

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It will be remembered how Jia Lian, on hearing of his father's grave illness, had hurried to his place of exile. When father and son met there was a tearful scene, which we need not describe in detail. Jia She gradually

recovered his health, and when Jia Lian received a letter with the latest (and none too cheerful) news from home, he asked his father for permission to return. On his way he heard of the amnesty, and two days later arrived home on the very day that the Edict was delivered to Rong-guo House - at the very moment in fact when Lady Xing was wondering who could receive the Edict on behalf of the family. Jia Lan was now theoretically entitled to perform this function, but he was rather too young. Then Jia Lian's arrival was announced. He exchanged greetings with them all, and the reunion was an occasion for expressions of both sorrow and joy. There was no time for much talk, however, and Jia Lian hurried to the main hall to make his kowtow to the Imperial emissary, who enquired after Jia She's health and said:

'Tomorrow you must proceed to the Imperial Treasury to receive your compensation. The Ning-guo residence will be restored to your family.'

The men rose to their feet, and the emissary took his leave. Jia Lian saw him off to the front gate, where he noticed a couple of country carts pulled up. The gatemen were refusing to allow the carts to stop there and a noisy argument was taking place. Jia Lian realized at once that these must be the carts bringing his daughter home and began shouting angrily at the gatemen:

'You pack of misbegotten curs! While I was away you turned on your own masters and drove my daughter from home. Now you want to prevent her from returning! Are you trying to take vengeance on me?'

The servants had been dreading Jia Lian's return, since he would be sure to find out sooner or later what had occurred in his absence and would certainly punish them for their part in it. It still came as something of a shock to them to hear him speaking like this so soon, as if he had already discovered everything (how this could be they did not understand). They rose to their feet and protested:

'While you were away, sir, some of us were sick, some were away on leave; it was all the doing of Master Huan, Mr Qiang and Mr Yun, sir, it had nothing to do with us.'

'Stupid incompetents!' cried Jia Lian. 'I'll deal with you when I'm finished. Hurry up and let those carts in!'

When Jia Lian went in he said nothing to Lady Xing. He went to Lady Wang's apartment, knelt before her and kowtowed:

'It is thanks to your foresight, Aunt Wang, that my daughter has returned safely. I shall say nothing of Cousin Huan's conduct in this matter. I hardly need to. But so far as that creature Yun is concerned, the last time he was left in charge there was trouble, and now, in the few months that I've been away, he has allowed the rot to set in. In my opinion he should be sent packing and never given a job of any kind here again.'

'What about your own brother-in4aw, Wang Ren?' exclaimed Lady Wang. 'What induced him to behave in such a despicable manner?'

'Don't waste your breath on him,' replied Jia Lian. 'I shall deal with him later.'

Suncloud came in to announce the arrival of Qiao-jie. When Lady Wang saw her, although the separation had not been a long one, the agonizing suspense of the days leading up to her escape flooded back into her mind, and she broke down and wept profusely. Qiao-jie cried a great deal herself. Jia Lian came over to thank Grannie Liu. Lady Wang bade her be seated, and together they discussed the whole adventure. When Jia Lian saw Patience again, he was overcome with gratitude for what she had done, and although he could hardly express his true feelings at such a family gathering, he could not help shedding a few tears. From this day on he held Patience in greater and greater esteem and resolved to promote her to the position of proper wife as soon as his father returned. But we anticipate.

Lady Xing had been sure there would be trouble as soon as Jia Lian learned of Qiao-Jie's disappearance. When she heard that he was at Lady Wang's she became most anxious and sent a maid to eavesdrop, who returned to inform her that Qiao-jie and Grannie Liu were both there talking, having just arrived back together. It suddenly dawned on Lady Xing what had happened. She knew that she had been hoodwinked and felt very peeved with Lady Wang:

'Stirring up trouble between me and my son! I wonder who it was that told Patience our secret in the first place!'

At that moment she saw Qiao-jie and Grannie Liu come in, accompanied by Patience. Lady Wang followed them and spoke to her, laying the blame for everything on Jia Yun and Wang Ren:
'You were taken in by what they said, Sister-in-law. You only meant the best. How could you have known the tricks and schemes they were up to!'

Lady Xing felt truly ashamed of herself. She saw that Lady Wang had acted rightly, and respected her for it. From now on relations between the two sisters-in-law became less strained.
Patience spoke to Lady Wang, and then took Qiao-jie to say hello to Bao-chai. The two of them exchanged commiserations.
'With the Emperor's favour now restored,' said Qiao-jie, 'our family is sure to prosper once more. And *surely* Uncle Bao will come back.'
As they were talking, Ripple came running into the room in a great lather, crying:
'Help! Aroma's been taken poorly!'
But for the outcome, you must read the next chapter.

CHAPTER 120

Zhen Shi-yin expounds the Nature
of Passion and Illusion
And Jia Yu-cun concludes the Dream
of Golden Days

As soon as she heard from Ripple that Aroma had been taken seriously ill, Bao-chai hurried in with Qiao-jie and Patience to see her. They found her lying unconscious on the kang, having had what seemed to be a heart seizure. They forced some cool boiled water through her lips and eventually she came round, whereupon they settled her down to sleep and sent for the doctor.
'How could Aroma have been taken like this so suddenly?' asked Qiao-jie.
'The other evening;' replied Bao-chai, 'she wept herself into a terrible state and had a sudden giddy spell. Mother told one of the maids to help her up from the ground and in the end she went to sleep. There was so much else happening at the time that we never sent for a doctor. That must be what has brought this on.'
The doctor arrived presently, and the ladies withdrew. When he had taken Aroma's pulses, he diagnosed her condition as the consequence of undue excitement and anger, wrote out a prescription accordingly and took his leave.
Aroma had in fact overheard (or *thought* she had overheard) someone saying that if Bao-yu failed to return all of his maids would be dismissed. It was the shock of hearing this that had upset her and aggravated her illness. When the doctor had departed, and when Ripple went out to prepare her medicine, Aroma was left lying alone on her bed, and in her confusion she thought she could see Bao-yu standing before her. Then the dim figure of a monk appeared before her eyes, holding the pages of an album open in his hand and saying:
'You are not destined to be mine. In days to come another will claim you for his own.'
Aroma was about to speak to him, when Ripple returned.
'Your medicine's ready,' she said. 'You'd better take it now.'
Aroma opened her eyes and knew that it had all been a dream. She did not confide in Ripple, but swallowed her medicine and lay there brooding to herself:
'Bao-yu must have gone away with that monk. I remember that day when he tried to take the jade out and give it to the monk, he seemed bent on escaping. When I tried to stop him he wasn't his normal self, pushing and

shoving me off like that. He didn't seem to care about me any more. And ever since then, he has been so cool with Mrs Bao, and quite indifferent towards the rest of us.

'I suppose you think this is enlightenment. But what sort of enlightenment is it, for you to abandon your own wife? Her Ladyship asked me to serve you, but although my monthly pay has been that of a chamber-wife, I have never been officially recognized as one. Now if the Master and Her Ladyship dismiss me and I insist on staying, out of respect to your memory, people will think me ridiculous. But how can I bear to leave, remembering how things were between us?'

She agonized over her dilemma, and recalling the ominous words Bao-yu had spoken to her in her dream she vowed to herself that if her destiny could not be shared with Bao-yu she would rather not live at all.

With the medicine, however, the pain in her heart gradually subsided. She felt guilty to be lying down all the time, but forced herself to rest and struggled through the next few days until she was able to get up and about again and wait on her mistress. Bao-chai herself although she was constantly thinking of Bao-yu and shed many a tear in private over her own unhappy fate, was kept bus) helping her own mother to arrange for the payment of Xue Pan's commutation fine, by no means an easy task. But of this no more.

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Jia Zheng had arrived in Nanking with Grandmother Jia's coffin, accompanied by Jia Rong and the coffins of Qin-shi, Xi-feng, Dai-yu and Faithful. They made arrangements for the Jia family members to be interred, and then Jia Rong took Dai-yu's coffin to her owr family graveyard to be buried there, while Jia Zheng saw to the construction of the tombs. Then one day a letter arrived from home in which he read of the success achieved by Bao-yu and Jia Lan in their examinations - which gave him great pleasure - and of Bao-yu's disappearance, which disturbed him greatly and made him decide to cut short his stay and hurry home. On his return journey he learned of the amnesty decreed by the Emperor, and received another letter from home telling him that Jia She and Cousin Zhen had been pardoned, and their titles restored. Much cheered by this news, he pressed on towards home, travelling by day and night.

On the day when his boat reached the post-station at Piling, there was a sudden cold tarn in the weather and it began to snow. He moored in a quiet, lonely stretch of the canal and sent his servants ashore to deliver a few visiting-cards and to apologize to his friends in the locality, saying that since his boat was due to set off again at any moment he would not be able to call on them in person or entertain them aboard. Only one page-boy remained to wait on him while he sat in the cabin writing a letter home (to be sent on ahead by land). When he came to write about Bao-yu, he paused for a moment and looked up. There, up on deck, standing in the very entrance to his cabin and silhouetted dimly against the snow, was the figure of a man with shaven head and bare feet, wrapped in a large cape made of **crimson** felt. The figure knelt down and bowed to Jia Zheng, who did not recognize the features and hurried out on deck, intending to raise him up and ask him his name. The man bowed four times, and now stood upright, pressing his palms together in monkish greeting. Jia Zheng was about to reciprocate with a respectful bow of the head when he looked into the man's eyes and with a sudden shock recognized him as Bao-yu.

'Are you not my son?' he asked.

The man was silent and an expression that seemed to contain both joy and sorrow played on his face. Jia Zheng asked again:

'If you are Bao-yu, why are you dressed like this? And what brings you to this place?'

Before Bao-yu could reply two other men appeared on the deck, a Buddhist monk and a Taoist, and holding him between them they said:

'Come, your earthly karma is complete. Tarry no longer.'

The three of them mounted the bank and strode off into the snow. Jia Zheng went chasing after them along the

slippery track, but although he could spy them ahead of him, somehow they always remained just out of reach. He could hear all three of them singing some sort of a song:

‘On **Green**sickness Peak
I dwell;
In the Cosmic Void
I roam.
Who will pass over,
Who will go with me,
Who will explore
The supremely ineffable
Vastly mysterious
Wilderness
To which I return!’

Jia Zheng listened to the song and continued to follow them until they rounded the slope of a small hill and suddenly vanished from sight. He was weak and out of breath by now with the exertion of the chase, and greatly mystified by what he had seen. Looking back he saw his page-boy, hurrying up behind him.

‘Did you see those three men just now?’ he questioned him.

‘Yes, sir, I did,’ replied the page. ‘I saw you following them, so I came too. Then they disappeared and I could see no one but you.’

J ia Zheng wanted to continue, but all he could see before him was a vast expanse of white, with not a soul anywhere. He knew there was more to this strange occurrence than he could understand, and reluctantly he turned back and began to retrace his steps.

The other servants had returned to their master’s boat to find the cabin empty and were told by the boatman that Jia Zheng had gone on shore in pursuit of two monks and a Taoist. They followed his footsteps through the snow and when they saw him coming towards them in the distance hurried forward to meet him, and then all returned to the boat together. Jia Zheng sat down to regain his breath and told them what had happened. They sought his authority to mount a search for Bao-yu in the area, but Jia Zheng dismissed the idea.

‘You do not understand,’ he said with a sigh. ‘This was indeed no supernatural apparition; I saw these men with my own eyes. I heard them singing, and the words of their song held a most profound and mysterious meaning. Bao-yu came into the world with his jade, and there was always something strange about it. I knew it for an ill omen. But because his grandmother doted on him so, we nurtured him and brought him up until now. That monk and that Taoist I have seen before, three times altogether. The first time was when they came to extol the virtues of the jade; the second was when Bao-yu was seriously ill and the monk came and said a prayer over the jade, which seemed to cure Bao-yu at once; the third time was when he restored the jade to us after it had been lost. He was sitting in the hall one minute, and the next he had vanished completely. I thought it strange at the time and could only conclude that perhaps Bao-yu was In some way blessed and that these two holy men had come to protect him. But the truth of the matter must be that he himself is a being from a higher realm who has descended into the world to experience the trials of this human life. For these past nineteen years he has been doted on in vain by his poor grandmother! Now at last I understand!’

As he said these words, tears came to his eyes.

‘But surely,’ protested one of the servants, ‘if Mr Bao was really a Buddhist Immortal, what need was there for him to bother with passing his exams before disappearing?’

‘How can you ever hope to understand these things?’ replied Jia Zheng with a sigh. ‘The constellations in the heavens, the hermits in their hills, the spirits in their caves, each has a particular configuration, a unique

temperament. When did you ever see Bao-yu willingly work at his books? And yet if once he applied himself, nothing was beyond his reach. His temperament was certainly unique.'

In an effort to restore his spirits, the servants turned the conversation to Jia Lan's success in the exams and the revival of the family fortunes. Then Jia Zheng completed and sealed his letter, in which he related his encounter with Bao-yu and instructed the family not to brood over their loss too much, and despatched one of the servants to deliver it to Rong-guo House while he himself continued his journey by boat. But of this no more.

*

When Aunt Xue heard of the general amnesty pronounced by the Emperor she sent Xue Ke to borrow money from wherever he could, to add to what she herself had collected for Xue Pan's commutation fine. The Board of Justice finally gave its approval and agreed to receive the money in settlement, whereupon an official document was issued authorizing Xue Pan's release. When he was reunited with his family, there was a great deal of news for him to catch ';p on, some of it sad, some more cheerful. But this we can safely leave to the reader's imagination. Xue Pan for his part uttered a solemn vow:

'If I ever behave like that again, may I be hacked to death piece by piece!'

Aunt Xue held her hand over his mouth:

'Just make your mind up to mend your ways! There's no need for all these blood-curdling oaths! But what are you going to do about Caltrop? Jin-gui died by her own hand, and though we may be poor, you can still afford to fill her place. After all Caltrop has been through on your account, I think you owe it to her to make her your proper wife. What do you think?'

Xue Pan nodded his head in consent, while Bao-chai gave Aunt Xue's Suggestion her full support. Caltrop herself seemed overwhelmed and flushed a deep crimson:

'It's the same to me if I continue to serve Mr Pan,' she said. 'There's no need to change things.'

From then on all the servants began calling her Mrs Pan, and looked up to her with great respect.

Xue Pan next went to call on the Jias and offered them his thanks for all that they had done. He was accompanied by his mother and Bao-chai, and there was quite a family gathering at Rong-guo House. Greetings were exchanged, and they were still chatting when a messenger arrived and presented the letter which Jia Zheng had written on the boat.

'The Master will be arriving in a matter of days,' he reported.

Lady Wang told Jia Lan to read the letter Out aloud. When he reached the passage where Jia Zheng described his encounter with Bao-yu, they all wept bitterly, Lady Wang, Bao-chai and Aroma most bitterly of all. Then they listened as Jia Lan read out Jia Zheng's words of advice, that they were not to grieve but to understand that this was Bao-yu's destiny, that he was the reincarnation of a Buddhist Immortal.

'If he *had* ever risen to become an official and his career had then ended in disaster, it would have been much worse,' they consoled themselves. 'That would have. meant public condemnation and ruin. Better that we should at least enjoy the honour of having had a holy man in the family. After all, it was his own father's and mother's karma, their virtue, that enabled him to be born into this family.

Without wishing to be disrespectful, even Sir Jing from Ning-giio House who practised yoga all those years failed to become an Immortal. Bao-yu's is no mean achievement. If you think of it in this light, Auntie' (referring to Lady Wang), 'it should be possible to have an easier mind.'

'Do you think I hold it against Bao-yu that he has abandoned *me?'* sobbed Lady Wang to Aunt Xue. 'No, what grieves me is the thought of his wife's unhappy fate. After little more than a year of marriage, how could he be so unfeeling as to desert her like this?'

Aunt Xue found this quite heart-rending, while Bao-chai had already wept herself into a faint. Since all the

menfolk had adjourned to the front hall, Lady Wang continued to pour her heart out to her sister:

'After all the alarms and excursions I had to endure on his behalf, I finally had the comfort of seeing him marry and pass his exams, and could even look forward to the birth of a grandchild. And now this! If I'd known it would end like this I would never have let him marry in the first place! I would never have let him bring such unhappiness on the poor girl!'

'These things are all decreed by fate,' Aunt Xue consoled her. 'What else could we possibly have said or done in the circumstances? We must count ourselves blessed that my daughter is with child, and that you will have a grandchild. I am sure that he at least will do well and bring some good out of all this. Look at Li Wan: her son has passed his Provincial examination, and no doubt next year young Lan will go on to become a Palace Graduate and an official. After all that his mother has suffered, now at last she can reap her reward. As for my daughter, you know that she is not a fickle or flighty girl. You have no cause to worry on her account.'

Lady Wang found her sister's words convincing and reassuring.

'Bao-chai was always so demure and restrained as a child,' she reflected to herself. 'Always fond of plain, simple things. Perhaps that is why she has ended up in this predicament. Perhaps everything in this world really is fated! Though Chai has wept a great deal, she has never lost her sense of dignity. In fact she has even on occasion tried to comfort me. What a rare girl she is! So unlike her poor husband, wh6 clearly was not meant for any joy in this world.'

Comforted somewhat by these thoughts, Lady Wang turned her mind to Aroma:

'None of the other maids presents much of a problem. The older ones can be married off, the younger ones can continue to wait on Bao-chai. But what am I to do with Aroma?'

She did not feel she could raise such a sensitive matter at a large family gathering, and decided to wait until the evening when she could discuss it privately with her sister.

Aunt Xue did not go home that night but stayed to comfort Bao-chai, afraid she might weep to excess. But in the end, as it turned out, Bao-chai was extremely reasonable. She reflected stoically on the whole course of events and concluded that since Bao-yu had always been a very strange creature, and since no doubt all that had happened had been preordained, there was little point in fighting against it. She expressed this in a very level-headed way to her mother, who was most relieved to hear her adopt this attitude and communicated it to Lady Wang when she next saw her. Lady Wang nodded and sighed:

'If I really were a wicked woman, fate would never have given me such a wonderful daughter-in-law!'

She started to become tearful again, and Aunt Xue tried to calm her down. She brought up the subject of Aroma:

'She has grown so terribly thin of late. All she ever does is brood about Bao-yu. It's right and proper for a wife to exhibit loyalty to her husband, even when he is a true husband to her no longer. And a chamber-wife may do the same if she wishes. But Aroma was never formally declared to be Ba~yu's chamber-wife, even though in fact we know that she was.'

'Yes, I was thinking about this only a short while ago,' said Lady Wang. 'I was waiting for a chance to talk it over with you in private. If we simply dismiss her from service, I'm afraid she won't want to go, and may even try to take her own life. We could keep her on, but I am afraid Sir Zheng would not approve. It is a tricky problem.'

'I hardly think Sir Zheng would want her to remain single and make a show of faithfulness to Bao-yu,' said Aunt Xue. 'He doesn't even know that she was Bao-yu's chamber-wife. He has always thought of her as just an ordinary maid, so it would seem rather absurd to him to want to keep her on. The only solution is for you to send for a member of her own family and impress upon them the importance of arranging a decent marriage for her. We can give her a generous send-off. She is a good-natured girl and still quite young. You should do what you can for her after all the years she has worked for you. Let me explain things carefully to her. There's no need to let her know straight away. First we should get in touch with her family and let them arrange a

match; next we should make some enquiries ourselves; and then if it seems that the prospective husband's family are in a position to support her properly, and if the young man himself seems suitable, we can let her leave and get married.'

'That's a very good idea. You've thought it all out very well,' replied Lady Wang. 'If we do not take the initiative, Sir Zheng may go ahead himself and deal with her in a very tactless way, and then I will be responsible for yet another misfortune.'

'Exactly the same thought had occurred to me,' said Aunt Xue nodding her head.

After they had chatted a while longer, Aunt Xue took her leave and went to Bao-chai's apartment. She found Aroma in floods of tears and did her best to console her, speaking so far as possible in vague generalities. Aroma was at heart a simple girl and not much of a talker, and she merely gave the appropriate responses to whatever Aunt Xue said.

'I am only a servant,' she said in the end, 'and it is very kind of you to think to speak to me like this, ma'am. I have never dared to go against any wish of Her Ladyship's.'

'There's a good girl!' said Aunt Xue, more pleased than ever with her. Bao-chai added a few high-sounding words of her own and when she and Aunt Xue parted from Aroma their minds were considerably more at ease.

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A few days later Jia Zheng came home and was greeted on his arrival by all the family. Jia She and Cousin Zhen had also returned from their exile by now, and they spent some time with Jia Zheng, catching up on each other's news. Then Jia Zheng went in to see the womenfolk. Bao-yu's absence cast a shadow of gloom over the gathering, which Jia Zheng tried to dispel as best he could.

'There was a reason behind all this!' he said. 'It is up to us men now to maintain a high standard of public life, and I hope that all of you meanwhile will lend us your support here at home. There must be no hint of any slipping back into the lax old ways. Each apartment can look after its own affairs, and we've no need of a general manager. Everything in our own apartment I leave to you' (this was addressed to Lady Wang), 'to deal with in a fitting manner.'

Lady Wang informed him that Bao-chai was with child, and that all Bao-yu's maids would be dismissed. Jia Zheng nodded in silence.

The following day he attended court to receive his instructions from the chief ministers.

'I am extremely grateful for His Majesty's gracious favour,' he said. 'But since this is still within my period of mourning, I beg you to instruct me how I should express my gratitude.'

The ministers offered to present a memorial on his behalf. The Emperor most magnanimously granted Jia Zheng a special audience, and after listening to his formal expression of thanks favoured him with several Imperial instructions and enquired after his son, the successful Provincial Graduate. Jia Zheng told him the full story of Bao-yu's disppearance. The Emperor marvelled at it and declared that Bao-yu's compositions had indeed manifested a remarkable originality, the very quality one would expect of a soul from another plane. Such a person could have excelled at court if such had been his destiny; but since he had not deigned to earn honours of a worldly nature, it was His Majesty's pleasure to confer upon him the religious title *Ma~ster Verbi Profundi* - Master of the Profound Word.

Jia Zheng kowtowed again to express his thanks for this great honour, and took his leave. On his return home he was received by Jia Lian and Cousin Zhen, who were delighted to hear the latest news from court.

'Ning-guo House has been set in order,' said Cousin Zhen, 'and with your consent we intend to take up residence there again. **Green** Bower Hermitage in the Garden has been set aside for my sister Xi-chun's devotions.'

After a pause for reflection Jia Zheng gave them a long homily on their debt of gratitude to the throne for all these favours. Jia Lian took the opportunity of raising the issue of his daughter's marriage:

‘Both Mother and Father are wiffing that Qiao-jie should be married to this Master Zhou.’

Jia Zheng had heard the full details of Qiao-jie’s story the previous evening, and replied:

‘If that is their decision, then so be it. There is nothing against a country life. What matters is that the family should be an honest one and the lad should be prepared to study and make his way in the world. Not every official at court is from a city family, after all.’ Jia Lian replied appropriately and continued:

‘Father is advanced in years, and is moreover afflicted with a chronic phlegmatic condition. He plans to retire for a few years and leave everything in your hands, Uncle.’

‘A quiet retirement in the country would suit me well enough,’ commented Jia Zheng. ‘But alas my obligations to the throne do not permit it.’

Jia Zheng went into see Lady Wang, while Jia Lian sent someone to invite Grannie Liu over. When she was informed that the match had been approved by the Master, she proceeded to favour Lady Wang and the other ladies with a long speech on the certain future success of the young man, how his family was sure to come up in the world, and what a prosperous multitude of sons and grandsons the couple were sure to breed.

While she was talking one of the maids came in to announce that Hua Zi-fang, Aroma’s brother, had sent his wife to convey his respects. Lady Wang spoke to the woman and ascertained from her that a match had been proposed by the Hua family to a certain Mr Jiang living south of the city, a young man with property and land and a pawnshop business of his own. He was a few years older than Aroma but had never married and was exceptionally good4ooking. Lady Wang was satisfied with this description of the match.

‘Tell them I agree,’ she said. ‘In a few days’ time your husband can come and fetch his sister and take her away to be married.’

She also sent some of her own people to make discreet enquiries, and received confirmation of the man’s character, whereupon she informed Bao-chai, and asked Aunt Xue to break the news gently to Aroma. Poor Aroma was inconsolable at the prospect of leaving Rong-guo House, but she could not offer any resistance. She remembered the visit Bao-yu had paid her at home many years previously, and the oath she had sworn afterwards, never to leave him even in death. ‘Now Her Ladyship is making me do this against my will, and if I insist on remaining single and faithful to his memory, people will call me shameless. But if I do go, it is not of my own wishing.’

She wept until she was choking with tears. Aunt Xue and Bao-chai did their utmost to talk her round, and eventually she thought to herself:

‘If I were to die here, it would be a poor return for all Her Ladyship’s kindness to me in the past. I had best die at home.’

So she bade farewell to them all, her heart heavy with sorrow. It was equally painful for her to part from the other maids. Resolved to end her own life at the first opportunity, she mounted a carriage and set off for home. When she saw her brother and his wife, there were more tears, but she could not bring herself to say what was on her mind. Her brother showed her one by one all the presents sent by the Jiang family, and the trousseau that he himself had made ready for her, a part of which, he explained, had been given by Lady Wang, while a part he had provided himsel£ This kindness made it harder than ever for Aroma to express her sorrow, and after spending two days at her brother’s home, she thought things over carefully again:

‘He has done everything so nicely for me. If I were to die here, wouldn’t I be hurting him?’ She turned it over and over in her mind, and no course of action seemed easy and right. Her heart was wound into a tight knot. She could only bear her fate stoically and bide her time.

The auspicious day in the almanac arrived for her to be taken to her husband’s home, and not wishing to make a scene she concealed her grief and let herself be helped into the bridal sedan. At her new home, she thought to

herself, she would make plans afresh. But once she arrived at the Jiang household, she found them so sincere and respectful towards her, deferring to her in every way as a young married lady, with the maids and serving-women all calling her Mrs Jiang the minute she set foot in the house, that death seemed impossible again: to die there would be to do *them* a great injury, she thought to herself; it would be a poor return for all *their* kindness. On her wedding night she wept without ceasing and would not at first yield to her husband's embrace, but gradually he won her over with gentle affection.

The next day, when they were unpacking her cases together, Jiang noticed among her things a **crimson** cummerbund. From this clue he deduced that his bride must have been one of the maids in attendance on Bao-yu, to whom he had once presented this cummerbund. Earlier he had thought that his bride was just one of Grandmother Jia's maids; he had certainly never dreamed that he was marrying Aroma. Jiang Yu-han (for it was he, Bao-yu's actor friend Bijou) was greatly moved when he remembered all the warmth shown him by Bao-yu in

the past, and as a consequence he treated Aroma with stlil greater courtesy and consideration. He showed her the viridian sash that Bao-yu had given him in exchange for the cummerbund, and this visible proof of her hushand's friendship with her erstwhile master inspired Aroma to believe that her life too lay in the hands of fate, that this marriage was indeed predestined. This in turn gave her the courage to open her heart to her husband. Jian proved himself worthy of her trust and showed her a great depth of feeling and a sincere respect, never venturing to steer her forcibly into any new direction, but showing her an ever more gentle affection and regard. Aroma was finally deprived of her last opportunity to take her own life.

Gentle Reader, it is indeed true (as Aroma concluded) that life is predestined and that 'there's naught to be done'. But unfortunately this argument is too often adduced by sons and statesmen who find themselves out of favour, or by faithful widows and widowers, as an excuse for moral torpor. It was this very streak in her personality that relegated Aroma to the 'Second Supplementary Register'. As a poet of former times once wrote, when passing by the temple built in memory of the Lady of the Peach Blossom:

Throughout the ages death has been the hardest choice;
Lady Xi was not alone in lamenting her weakness.*

(*in the Spring and Autumn period, King Wen of the state of Chu (ruled 689-676 BC) defeated and put to death the ruler of the state of Xi. He then took the Lord Xi's widow as his concubine and had two sons by her. She refused to communicate verbally with her new master, however. and when King Wen asked her the reason for her silence she eventually replied: 'I, a widow, now serve a second husband. Having thus failed to seek death, what is there that I can say?')

Aroma's married life is the first chapter of another history. Our narrative returns to Jia Yu-cun, who, having been convicted of avarice and extortion, was also released under the general amnesty and allowed to return to his native city as a common citizen. He sent his family on ahead and himself travelled with a young page and a cartload of baggage. His journey brought him once more to Wake Ness Ferry at Rushford Hythe, and as he approached the river he saw a Taoist hermit emerging from a thatched hut by the water's edge, clasping his hands in greeting. This time Yu-cun recognized him at once as Zhen Shi-yin and promptly bowed in response.

'Esteemed Mr Jia,' began the old hermit, 'I trust you have been well since we last parted?'

'So you, sir, are indeed my erstwhile patron Mr Zhen, in Immortal form!' exclaimed Yu-cun. 'Why did I not know you at our last encounter? Afterwards, when I heard that your hermitage had been destroyed by fire, I was most concerned for your safety. I am fortunate indeed to have been granted this second opportunity to marvel at the profundity of your spiritual attainments. Alas, I am as benighted as ever, as you can see from my present condition.'

‘On the previous occasion,’ replied Zhen Shi-yin, ‘your position was so exalted that I dared not presume an acquaintance. Because of our old friendship, I said a few words, which you ignored altogether. Wealth and poverty, success and failure, none of these are coincidental. Nor is our meeting again like this today a coincidence, but rather a meaningful and marvellous event. We are not far from my lodge and I would be delighted if you could stop by and pass the time of day with me.’

Jia Yu-cun consented with pleasure and the two men walked hand in hand, the page following them with the baggage-cart to the little thatched hermitage. Shi-yin ushered Yu-cun in, and he sat down and was brought tea by the old man’s acolyte. Yu-cun asked to hear the story of his mystical conversion, and Shi-yin smiled:

‘In an instant my world was transformed. You yourself, sir, hailing as you do from the realm of luxury and opulence, must surely have heard there of a person by the name of Bao-yu?’

‘Of course,’ replied Yu-cun. ‘Recently I heard a rumour to the effect that he too has taken refuge in the dharma. I saw something of him in the past and it certainly never occurred to me that he would take a step like this.’

‘There is nothing unexpected about it,’ said Shi-yin. ‘I have known of his strange destiny for many years. Ever since that day long ago, in fact, when I met you outside my abode in Carnal Lane and we had that little chat. I had already encountered him then.’

‘But the capital is a long way from your old home,’ said Yu-cun in great surprise. ‘How could you possibly have set eyes on him at that time?’

‘We had long enjoyed a spiritual communion,’ replied Shi-yin darkly.

‘In that case, sir, you must know of his present whereabouts?’

‘Bao-yu,’ replied the old man, ‘is the Stone, the Precious Jade. Before the two mansions of Rong and Ning were searched and their worldly goods impounded, on the very day when Bao-chai and Dai-yu were separated, the Stone had already quit the world. This was in part to avoid the impending calamity, in part to permit the consummation of the union. From that moment the Stone’s worldly karma was complete, its substance had returned to the Great Unity. All that remained was for it to demonstrate some small fraction of its spiritual powers by achieving academic distinction and by leaving behind an heir to bring honour to the family name. Thus its precious nature, its magical power, its capacity for spiritual transformation, these were made manifest, and all could know that it was no ordinary stone of this world. To this end the Buddhist mahāsattva Impervioso and the Taoist illuminate Mysterioso first brought it into the world, and now that its destiny is fulfilled it is they who will take it back once more to its place of origin. That is the sum of my knowledge concerning Bao-yu and, as you put it, his “present whereabouts”.’

Although Yu-cun could not take all of this in, he was able to follow about half. He nodded his head and sighed:

‘So that is the truth of the matter. And I never knew. But if Bao-yu is a person of such a remarkable spiritual pedigree, why did he first need to be blinded by human passion before he could reach enlightenment?’

Shi-yin smiled:

‘Even though I may seek to expound this, I fear you may never be able to understand it fully. The Land of Illusion and the Paradise of Truth are one and the same. Could two readings of the registers and a whole lifetime’s experience fail to bring enlightenment? Could he fail to see the Alpha and the Omega? If the Fairy Flower regained its true primordial state, then surely the Magic Stone should do likewise?’

This time the hermit’s words were truly beyond Yu-cun’s powers of comprehension. He knew only that they must contain some esoteric meaning, and did not venture to probe any further.

‘It is so kind of you to tell me all this about Bao-yu,’ he said. ‘But may I ask you another question: why is it that of all the ladies in these noble families, none, including Her Grace the Imperial Jia Concubine, has come to more than an undistinguished end?’

On hearing this Shi-yin sighed:

‘Do not take my words amiss, sir! The fact of the matter is that all these noble ladies to whom you refer hail

from the Skies of Passion and the Seas of Retribution. Since olden times their sex has been under a natural obligation to remain pure, pure from lust, pure even from the slightest taint of passion. Thus amorous beauties such as Cui Ying-ying and Su Xiao-xiao were fallen fairies, their celestial hearts polluted with the base desires of this world, while romantic poets such as Song Yu and Si-ma Xiang-ru sinned in like manner through the written word. Consider for a moment: how can any being ensnared in human attachment hope to "come to more than an undistinguished end", as you put it?'

As he listened to the hermit's words, Jia Yu-cun found himself stroking his beard meditatively and heaving a long sigh.

'May I ask, sir,' he ventured, 'whether the Ning and Rong houses will ever rise again to their former heights of prosperity?'

'It is preordained that prosperity comes with virtue, and calamity with evil,' replied Shi-yin. 'At present in these two houses the virtuous have turned to the true path, while the wicked have at least repented of their ways. In time to come, orchid and cassia will bloom, and the family fortunes will indeed prosper again. This is natural and right.'

Yu-cun lowered his head in thought for a while, then suddenly laughed:

'Yes! Of course! There is one among them called Lan (Orchid), who has recently passed his examinations. As for the cassia you mention, could this be in some way connected with what you said earlier about Bao-yu achieving academic distinction and leaving behind a creditable heir? Is his posthumous son a Jia Gui (Cassia) destined for glory?'

Shi-yin gave an inscrutable smile:

'Time will show. It would be wrong to make predictions about this now.

Yu-cun had still more questions to ask, but Shi-yin was clearly unwilling to provide any further replies. He told his boy to lay the table and bring in the food, and invited Yu-cun to eat with him. When they had finished their meal, Yu-cun was still curious, this time wanting to know the secrets of his own future; but his luck had run out.

'Rest awhile, sir,' said Shi-yin, 'in my humble hermitage. I still have a duty to perform, and today is the day for its completion.'

This took Yu-cun by surprise:

'In view of the exalted spiritual state you have achieved, I cannot conceive what karma can remain for you to fulfil?'

'It concerns the love between a man and a woman.'

This amazed Yu-cun even more.

'Pray explain, sir.'

'There is something of which you are ignorant, my respected friend,' replied Shi-yin. 'My daughter Ying-lian was, as you know, kidnapped when she was a little girl. You yourself gave judgement in the case when you first held office. Now she is married to a certain Mr Xue and is about to give birth to his child. In so doing she will die. She will leave behind her a son to continue the Xue family's ancestral rites. Now is the moment for her earthly life to cease, and I must be at hand to receive her spirit.

With a shake of his sleeve Shi-yin was gone. Yu-cun began to feel very dozy and had soon fallen asleep in the little hermitage at Wake Ness Ferry by Rushford Hythe.

Shi-yin went to receive Caltrop's soul across the threshold of death and to escort her to the Land of Illusion, there to be handed over to the Fairy Disenchantment and to have her name entered on the register. As he passed through the great archway he saw the monk and the Taoist drifting towards him, and approaching them he said:

'Mahisattva! Illuminate! My felicitations! Is the love karma fulfilled? Have all those souls involved been duly returned and entered in the registers?'

‘The karma is not yet complete,’ they replied. ‘But that senseless Block has already returned. Now all that remains is to restore it to its place of origin and to record the last instalment of its story. Then its little trip into the world will not have been in vain.’

Shi-yin clasped both hands together in salutation and took his leave. The monk and the Taoist continued on their way bearing the jade, until finally they came to the foot of **Green**sickness Peak and there, in the very place where Nu-wa had once smelted her fiery amalgam to repair the vault of Heaven, they carefully deposited their burden and each drifted off on his way.

An otherworldy tome recounts an otherworldly tale,
As Man and Stone become once more a single whole.

One day Vanitas the Taoist passed again by **Green**sickness Peak and saw the Stone ‘that had been found unfit to repair the heavens’, lying there still, with characters inscribed on it as before. He read the inscription through carefully again and noticed that a whole new section had been appended to the gātha with which the earlier version concluded. This new material provided several dénouements and tied up various loose ends in the plot, completing the overall design of fate that underlay the original story.

‘When I first saw this strange tale of Brother Stone’s I thought it worth publishing as a novel and copied it down for that purpose. But at the time it was unfinished; the cycle within it was incomplete. There was in the earlier version none of this material relating the Stone’s return to the source. I wonder when this rather admirable last instalment can have been added? From it the reader can indeed see that Brother Stone’s experience of life sharpened the edge of his spiritual perception, and brought him to a more complete awareness of the Tao. At the end he had no cause for remorse or regret. But with the passing of the years the characters of this new version of the inscription may wear away and be misread. I had better copy it down again in this complete form and find someone in the world with leisure on his hands to publish it and transmit its message: that things are not as they seem, that the extraordinary and the ordinary, truth and fiction, are all relative to each other. Perhaps my fellow humans whom the dream of life has ensnared may find in this tale an echo, may be summoned back by it to their true home; while free spirits of the high hills may find in the record of Brother Stone’s transformations, as in that older tale of the Migration of the Magic Mountain, a reflected light to quicken their own aspirations.’

So Vanitas copied it all down and slipping this new version into his sleeve took it off with him to the luxurious, opulent world of men, to seek out a suitable mortal for the task of publication. But all the men he encountered were either too busy establishing themselves in their careers, or else too preoccupied with their day-to-day survival, to have the leisure or inclination to prattle with a Stone. Then at last Vanitas came to the little hermitage at Wake Ness Ferry by Rushford Hythe; there he found a man asleep (from which he deduced him to be a man of leisure) and thought he would give him this Story of the Stone to read. But however many times he called out, he could not rouse him from his slumber. Eventually he heaved him up and gave him a good shake, and the man slowly opened his eyes. He skimmed through the book and let it fall from his hand; saying:

‘I have seen all this myself at first-hand. As far as I can see your record contains no errors. Allow me to tell you of a man who can transmit this story to the world on your behalf, and by so doing bring this strange affair to a proper conclusion.’

‘Whom do you mean?’ asked Vanitas eagerly.

‘You must wait until the year_, the *day* of the_month. At the_hour, you must go to a certain Nostalgia Studio, where you will find a certain Mr Cao Xue-qin. Just tell him: “Jia Yu-cun says...” and ask him to do such-and-such and so forth...’

Yu-cun dozed off again, and Vanitas made a careful note of his instructions. Sure enough, after an incalculable

number of generations, an infinity of aeons, there was indeed a Nostalgia Studio and in it a Mr Cao Xue-qin, perusing the histories of bygone days. Vanitas did as he had been instructed; he repeated Yu-cun's words and handed him the Story of the Stone to read. This Mr Cao smiled and said:

'Rustic fiction indeed *(Jia Yu Cun Yan)!'*

'How is it that you know the man, sir? May I deduce from this that you are willing to transmit this tale for him?'

'You are aptly named Vanitas,' exclaimed Cao. 'You have a Nothing in your Belly, a very Vanity. These may be rustic words, but they contain no careless errors or nonsensical passages. It would be a pleasure to share this with a few like-minded friends, to help the wine down after a meal or to while away the solitude of a rainy evening by a lamplit window. No need for some self-important being to commend it or publish it. You in your insistence on ferreting out facts are like the man who dropped his sword in the water and thought to find it again by making a mark on the side of his boat; you are like a man playing a zither with the tuning-pegs glued fast.'

Vanitas lifted his head and guffawed at this, dropped the manuscript to the ground and went breezily on his way. As he went he said to himself:

'So it was really all utter nonsense! Author, copyist and reader were alike in the dark! Just so much ink splashed for fun, a game, a diversion!'

A later reader of the manuscript added a four-line gātha, to expand a little on the author's original *envoi:*

When grief for fiction's idle words
More real than human life appears,
Reflect that life itself's a drearm
And do not mock the reader's tears.